BLACK VALLEY

Hugo Wast

Jno S Barbee Jr. —

Xmas '29

BLACK VALLEY

By HUGO WAST

BLACK VALLEY
STONE DESERT
PEACH BLOSSOM

BLACK VALLEY

A Romance of the Argentine

BY

HUGO WAST

TRANSLATED BY

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WAST
BLACK VALLEY

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Chapter I

WHERE THE WIND ROARS!

ONE night Gracián Palma awoke with a start in his bed in the dormitory of the Convent School of Cordova. Two lamps were burning low in the large room and by their dim light he saw Brother Felix bending over him, looking even more solemn than usual.

"Get up and dress yourself," he said. "They have sent word that your father is sick."

The boy was startled by the news. He jumped out of bed and began to put on his clothes with feverish haste, while the dark form of the Brother moved slowly away.

It was winter and the gust of cold air that struck him as he left the room made him wish for an instant for his overcoat. But there was no time to lose. Brother Felix led him hurriedly through the dark cloisters along the walls of which he could barely discern above his head the painted yellow border with its maxims in verse which decorated all the halls, the dining room and even the dormitories of the school.

In the porter's lodge a man was waiting for him. He led Gracián over to a carriage. In the light of the lanterns the boy looked up at him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

In a kind voice the stranger told him his name. Gracián shook his head. He did not recognize it.

"I was a friend of your father's," the stranger explained.

"What? What do you mean? Is papa . . . sick?"

"Come now . . . I didn't mean to say that. . . . I was and am a friend of your father's; I used to know him better than I do now, but . . . Confound it! What is the use of trying to hide it from you? . . . It is true. Your father died very suddenly. . . ."

The boy was silent — his eyes wide open. At first he did not comprehend what he had heard. Then he began to weep bitterly.

Meanwhile the carriage was rolling noisily along the pavement of a dark, narrow street. It stopped before the broad doorway of one of the few old houses still standing in Cordova.

There were lights in all the rooms and the patio seemed filled with people who had come to watch in the house of death.

Gracián passed through their midst without recognizing anyone. His father had had few friends. Most of these, scarcely more than acquaintances, had frequented the club which he occasionally attended. He had always been somewhat shy in company and had only gone out when his duties as a physician with a small clientele

or his position as a professor in the State College made it absolutely necessary.

He had lived alone with a housekeeper who had been with him since before his wife died, and a man servant who did odd jobs about the house. His son had come home from school from time to time for the holidays. He had a brother traveling abroad somewhere, but Gracián had never seen him.

The large number of people who had gathered at the house that night had been drawn there by the unusual and striking manner of his death. It had aroused the interest of all those who had known Dr. Palma and had esteemed him as a kind and honorable man.

Death had come upon him unawares as he sat at his desk after dinner, writing a letter, which was to be his will, to Don Jesús de Viscarra, the only person to whom he was bound by the ties of a deep and lasting friendship.

There in his office — the large room faintly lighted by a green lamp — Gracián found his father lying on a canvas cot. A small stream of blood had issued from his mouth, staining the pillow under his head.

On the table under the lamp lay the unfinished letter. A blot had fallen on the spot where Death, stealing up "like a thief in the night," had stopped the writer's hand.

After the funeral Gracián, who had no reason to stay longer in the lonely house, returned to school, his mind still full of his father's letter.

"My dear friend," it ran, "I know that my days are numbered. I have already had two attacks of angina

pectoris this year and the third, which will be my last, cannot be long in coming. I have no one to whom to entrust my boy, who has just reached his fourteenth year, except you, my old friend, whose affection I know has not been diminished by the years in which we have been absent from each other. I do not even know my brother's whereabouts.

"My son is a good lad — too good, perhaps, for I fear he lacks firmness of character. I hope that you will look after him when I am gone. The little I have — this house and . . ."

At this point the thread of his thought had been broken off . . .

Gracián wondered who Don Jesús de Viscarra might be, this man destined from now on to take his father's place; and there came to his mind the figure of a tall gentleman, thin and rather distinguished looking, who had had dinner with them one day, had treated him with great dignity, and had spent all his time at table talking of things which made the little boy drop off to sleep, his elbows on the table cloth.

This must have been he. Gracián's father had told him something about him the next day after he left.

"He is the owner of Black Valley," he said. "He lives like an old-time lord up in the hills beyond Cosquín, near Lake Brava 'where the wind roars.'"

The puzzling phrase remained fixed in the boy's memory.

A week after his father's death Gracián was sum-

moned to the porter's lodge during class time. He immediately guessed that Don Jesús de Viscarra had arrived and wanted to see him.

And he was right. He found the man who had so profoundly impressed him by his grave manner, his eloquent speech, and his tall Quixotic figure, walking through the cloisters with the rector of the school.

Señor de Viscarra patted Gracián's cheek affectionately, inquired about his studies and his health, and surveyed him with interest, all the time stroking his pointed beard, which was slightly streaked with gray. Then he continued his conversation with the rector on some transcendental subject which the boy did not understand.

When he left, he patted Gracián again and promised to return for him on the last day of the term.

"I'll take you to spend the summer at Black Valley," he said, and added with a slight smile — "where the wind roars."

The words again stirred the boy's imagination and cast an air of mystery around the person who was now entering his life.

For some months he dreamt of Black Valley as a place at once terrifying and fascinating.

On the last day of the term Señor de Viscarra reappeared. With affectionate pleasure he pinned on Gracián's breast the medal which the boy had won for good behavior.

That same afternoon they left the school together —

Gracián's guardian talking to him animatedly of all sorts of things, especially of the value of a religious education for the formation of character.

A little later they took the train for Cosquín, where they were to find horses waiting to take them that same night to Black Valley.

In spite of the fact that Señor de Viscarra rarely visited the city he had an air of distinction in his manners, and his clothes, though a little old-fashioned in cut, were very neat and well kept.

At the station he bought some magazines and throughout the whole trip he read them intently, leaving Gracián's thoughts free to wander as they would.

Like the film of a moving picture the landscape flew by — flourishing estates, wild, barren fields, a winding, muddy river; a bleak overhanging mountain around which the train, its two engines panting, wound its way through a narrow pass cut out of the rock; further on a dam, which looked small against the hills; and finally Cosquín with its great willows and its gloomy poplars wrapped in the shadow of the approaching night.

A peon mounted on a mule and leading two horses by the bridle was at the station waiting for Señor de Viscarra. He took the boy's bag and started off ahead of them at a fast trot.

Don Jesús very deliberately took down the leggings which were tied to his saddle and fastened them over his thin legs to protect his clothing. He helped Gracián get on his horse and then with ease and agility mounted

his own, a spirited animal, but responsive at once to a quieting word from its master.

They started out down the limestone road which even in the darkness lay clearly outlined before them.

The first stars were just beginning to appear. The moon would not rise until later and Gracián began to fear that once they had left the white ribbon of the highway and entered the woods they might lose their way.

"Are you afraid, my boy?" asked Señor de Viscarra.

"No, *señor,*" he answered, more bravely than truthfully.

And his guardian, whose horse was trotting at quite a fast pace, turned his head to say in a pleased tone:

"This is the wildest part of the mountains, on the road to Lake Brava, but you need not worry about our losing our way. I have known the road to Black Valley ever since I was a child."

In order not to be left behind Gracián urged on his sprightly little horse until its hoofs struck sparks from the stones.

He was not a good rider and he was obliged to cling to the horn of his saddle to keep from falling, but he followed as closely upon his guardian's heels as possible.

The twilight was deepening in the valley below. A tall *molle*-tree lifted its dark crest against the strip of blue in the west toward which they were riding.

They reached the top of the hill and as they descended

on the other side Gracián noticed that Señor de Viscarra left the highway, now turning southward to the left, and took a path leading in the other direction.

After a few paces he stopped to wait for the boy.

"What is that, *señor?*" the latter ventured to ask, as he heard from below in the ravine a noise like distant thunder.

"That is the Yuspe river," said his guardian, and spoke to his horse, which began to pick its way down the hill.

The rippling reflection from the water below broke the blackness of the shadows. The noise of the falls sounded like a great cart rolling over a precipice. When they reached the river Don Jesús stopped at a sandy spot on the bank and after loosening his horse's bridle, without dismounting, he let him drink.

A few minutes later both riders turned into a wild growth of thorn-apples, *molles,* and ash-colored carob-trees, where the master of Black Valley was still able to pick out the invisible path.

Gracián began to feel the chill of the night air and an indefinable fear of the strange shadows surrounding him on all sides. He shivered whenever a branch brushed his forehead or a wet weed licked his feet.

"Aren't you afraid?" his guardian asked again.

And again he was ashamed to confess his real feelings.

"No, *señor,*" he answered.

"The moon will soon rise and then we can see better. In fact, it has already risen," Señor de Viscarra cor-

rected himself, "but the hill yonder shuts it off from our view."

Gracián looked at the sky and noticed that the stars of the Milky Way were beginning to fade in the moonlight. Only the four nails of the Southern Cross were still shining. And soon to his relief he saw the great golden disc appear from behind the hill and light up the darkness of the woods.

But to his unaccustomed eyes the wavering moonlight only served to fill the forest with fantastic shapes.

He tried to ride alongside of his guardian, but as he drew up, Don Jesús said:

"Take care! The path is narrow and we must go single file. Are you tired?"

"A little, *señor.*"

"You will soon be able to rest."

"Is it much further?"

"We have gone a little more than half way."

"Oh! How far it must be!" Gracián ventured to murmur, and he decided to shut his eyes during the rest of the journey and let his horse pick its own way. Then he would not have to see all those strange forms which were lying in ambush along the edge of the path.

But he could not keep his eyes shut. He continued to look about him. Night insects were cutting the darkness in unsteady, luminous lines, which broke into zigzags when they started to alight. The phosphorous of the fireflies gleamed here and there among the bushes, and the crickets filled the silent woods with their ceaseless chirping.

Again they heard the distant thunder from the depths of a ravine and knew that the river was not far away.

"It is the same river," said Señor de Viscarra, "the Yuspe. It follows a very winding course before it reaches its mouth."

The path had become steeper and steeper. The horses tested the stones with their hoofs before venturing upon it. The river flowed by between huge boulders, high as sepulchres. Near by was the ford — a sandy shoal where the water barely reached the flanks of Gracián's horse.

When they had crossed over to the other side, Don Jesús turned around and said with a certain solemnity in his cordial voice:

"This is where my land begins. The house is not far away."

They began to ascend a high hill where the road was much better.

"This is the short cut," Don Jesús observed again. "Over there, skirting the hillock, runs the highway. By taking this bridle path we save ourselves a great distance."

When they had reached the summit a large plain lay stretched out before them, across which drifted the gentle murmur of the wind blowing through a grove of trees. The moon had turned to silver the tops of some large poplars which stood in the clearing, gloomy as cypress-trees. Among them they could see the gleam of a burning torch.

The boy was moved by the profound beauty of the

landscape. It reminded him of old stories of fairies and witches.

"Black Valley!" exclaimed Señor de Viscarra stopping and pointing to the light with the butt of his whip.

And it was Gracián who added this time in the hope of hearing some explanation:

" — where the wind roars!"

They traversed the rest of the road in silence, side by side and, welcomed by the barking of the dogs, entered the house, which seemed even larger, gloomier, and more silent in the darkness.

The peon who had preceded them was already there to look after the horses. Don Jesús dismounted and disappeared in the arched entrance-hall.

The boy remained alone for a moment, surrounded by the sniffing dogs, more frightened even than he had been in the woods, until a woman came out with a lantern and led him into the dining room. Here under the shadow of a large lamp was a table set invitingly for supper.

The room was large and at night seemed even larger than it really was. The tiled roof was supported by thick whitewashed beams. There were two corner cupboards where the dishes were kept, a shelf at the back of the room with two vases of flowers below a print of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a black hair-cloth sofa, and along the wall some leather chairs with frames of heavy hard wood polished by the use of years.

Gracián was told to sit down and was again left to himself until Señor de Viscarra, who had changed his

city clothes for a costume less formal but very neat and appropriate, reappeared. He walked over to the shelf, took down a bell, and rang it with as much ceremony as if he were performing a religious rite.

An old clock which hung at the head of the room struck nine.

"An hour late!" murmured Don Jesús to no one in particular.

The sound of the gong had not yet died away when Flavia, the sister of Señor de Viscarra, entered the room and walked over to speak to Gracián, who stood looking at her, impressed by her strange beauty.

She could not have been more than thirty years old. Her figure was unusually graceful. The only color in her pale face was the carmine of her lips and her luminous eyes, which were black in the darkness, but green in the light of day.

And behind her with a soft rustle like that of a dove returning to its cote came Mirra, a little girl eleven years old, the only daughter of the master of the house. On seeing Gracián she stood still for a minute and then ran to welcome her father, who picked her up in his arms as if she weighed nothing at all and kissed her on the eyes.

Then they all went to their places. The one assigned to Gracián was next to Flavia and opposite Mirra. Before they sat down Señor de Viscarra from the head of the table crossed himself and asked a blessing, and his sister and daughter repeated it after him.

A young girl named Pastora, a little older than Mirra, waited on them and Flavia served the food while Don Jesús talked about his journey and his short visit in Cordova, about the excellent school whose commencement exercises he had attended, and about the medal which his ward had received for good behavior.

Gracián ate in silence, aware that sometimes Flavia's gentle gaze and sometimes Mirra's bold sparkling eyes were resting upon him.

As they were eating dessert, the same peon who had met them at Cosquín came in to ask his master for orders for the next day. In the light of the lamp Gracián noticed what a fine type of creole he was and how well he bore himself.

His name was Lazarus and he was the overseer of the estate. A silence fell upon the little company at his appearance. Señor de Viscarra was thinking over the plans for the next day and the rest sat watching him, when suddenly they heard a scream out in the woods. It was neither a cry of pain nor a shriek of anger; and it was hard to say whether it had come from a human being or a wild beast.

"It is only Pichana!" said Flavia in a tone of anxious apology.

Señor de Viscarra, who had started up, overturning his chair, looked at her a trifle suspiciously.

"It was only Pichana," she said again in the same tone.

Then Lazarus spoke up:

"That's funny. As I was coming from Cosquín a little while ago I met her about a league away from here."

"Pichana flies at night like a soul in pain," urged Flavia.

"But she flies on foot," objected Don Jesús, who had sat down again.

The meal was finished in silence. Don Jesús' face wore a frown. After the dessert he got up and for a time paced up and down in the arched passageway, where the shadows were heavy. Then he called Gracián to show him his room.

"Are you afraid to sleep alone?"

"No, *señor*," answered the boy, ashamed to confess the truth.

And that night for the first time in his life he slept alone, his head covered with the blankets and his sleep filled with troubled dreams in which his short past was strangely confused with his uncertain and mysterious future.

Chapter II

MIRRA

A MESSENGER came to Black Valley that night from the ranch up in the sierras which Don Jesús and his brother owned jointly. He brought word that his master was in poor health and very anxious to see his brother. Don Jesús decided to set out the next day at dawn.

Before he left he woke Gracián, to teach him to be an early riser.

"Climb out, my boy," he called to him from the doorway. Gracián sat up in bed, his eyes heavy with sleep. He had entirely forgotten the events of the day before.

"If you dress quickly, you can come out with me to look for my horse," said Señor de Viscarra as he walked away. His firm steps resounded on the flagstone floor of the arched corridor, which in this spacious ranch house, was as broad as the cloisters of Gracián's school.

The boy shook off his drowsiness, dressed himself hurriedly, and followed. He found Don Jesús waiting for him in the courtyard.

In the daylight Black Valley with its broad, green fields in their frame of steep wooded hills, its shady willow grove down by the dam, and its wide drive en-

circling the house, was by no means the phantastic landscape that it had appeared to Gracián the night before. But there was still a trace of melancholy in its unusual and solitary beauty.

The house, flooded now with sunshine, commanded a view of the entire valley. It was built in the form of a hollow square around a courtyard. An open corridor or *galería* with stone arches surrounded the enclosure. Along its cornice ran a honeysuckle vine, white with flowers.

In the hard soil of the courtyard, which Tránsito, the colored servant, swept daily with a coarse broom, grew two enormous *aguaribays,* whose leaves were said to be good for medicine.

Don Jesús seemed a little less severe in this atmosphere.

"Come along, my boy," he said. And as Gracián walked beside him he began to tell how healthful life in the country is for both soul and body.

The door of the corral had been left unfastened the night before and the horses had slipped out and gone to the woods. The master's favorite, which he alone was accustomed to ride, was the only one left. Don Jesús was obliged to wait until some of the farm hands had caught the mounts for the men who were going with him.

On their way to the corral they passed in front of the cattle yard where Flavia, Mirra, and little Pastora were milking the cows.

Señor de Viscarra crossed over and opened the gate for Gracián. Then he closed it again.

After a moment's silence Gracián asked:

"Is Señora Flavia Mirra's mother?"

"No, Flavia is not married," explained Señor de Viscarra. "She is my sister. Mirra is my daughter."

The boy was silent. The relationship puzzled him.

"Did you think that they looked alike, perhaps?" asked his guardian.

"No, *señor,* I just asked out of curiosity. . . ."

"And would you have thought, if I hadn't told you, that Flavia was my sister?"

"No, *señor.*"

"We are not at all alike, are we?"

"No, *señor,* no indeed."

Señor de Viscarra walked on silently with quickened steps.

As he passed, drops of dew fell from the blades of grass which sparkled like threads of fairy yarn. Flies were buzzing through the air and honey bees flew by on their way to the bashful wild flowers. Now and then Gracián felt a little snail, white and fragile as crystal, crunch beneath his feet.

Suddenly Don Jesús pointed to a horse standing behind a clump of bushes.

"There is Golden," he said.

At the sound of their voices the beautiful animal came out into the open field and stood still. His glossy coat shone in the sunlight. He had one white foot and a white star on his forehead. He came forward to meet his master, his head erect and his ears up. It was a pleasure to see him.

They caught him easily and Don Jesús slipped the halter which he had brought with him over the horse's head.

"Can you ride bareback?" he asked the boy, as he patted the animal's clean, smooth neck.

"No, *señor.*"

"It is a good thing to learn."

He took Gracián by the arms, as he had taken Mirra the night before, and without any apparent effort lifted him upon the back of the startled animal and handed him the end of the halter.

"Ride over to the house," he said, "but don't excite him. Don't hang on to his mane. That is not good for a thoroughbred."

The horse walked slowly down the path with Gracián on his back half frightened to death.

In the courtyard he found a short, thick-set man with a long beard, gleaming eyes, and quick, cat-like movements. His shirt was worn threadbare and through it one could see his muscles, firm and strong as those of a gorilla. His low forehead and hesitant speech did not promise much for his intelligence.

Gracián learned later that his name was Amoroso. Whether this was his real name or one given to him in jest no one knew, not even his master, but he answered to it like a dog.

He was leading a vicious mule, which he proceeded to mount.

"I caught her down by Pichana's cave," he explained to his master, who had just arrived.

A few minutes later Don Jesús on his horse and Amoroso on the mule set out for the mountains. Another farmhand was to follow them with the supplies.

Gracián was left behind for Flavia to take care of and Mirra to amuse.

As soon as his guardian had disappeared from sight he turned and looked at the house with its white stone walls gleaming in the sunshine. Then, as he was about to walk over to the woods, thinking that he might find there some birds' nests with eggs or young pigeons in them, he saw Mirra's black eyes watching him from behind one of the pillars.

He stood still and the little girl came out from her hiding place and ran over to him. She was energetically shaking a bottle of cream which she held in her hand.

"Do you know how to make butter?" she asked without waiting for any formal greeting.

Gracián shook his head. Where should he ever have learned such things?

"Look! This is the way!" she said, shaking the cream. "Do you want to help me?"

He nodded. He was still too much embarrassed to talk. The little girl's boldness disconcerted him.

She put the bottle in his hand and ran into the house. When she came out after a minute with another he was still standing there holding it awkwardly.

Mirra burst out laughing, showing her little white teeth, sharp as those of a wolf-cub.

She was dressed all in white, in a blouse and a short

starched skirt. Her jet black hair hung down her back in two braids. Her eyes were dark, but very bright. They were shaded by long, dark lashes. Her small, turned-up nose gave her a saucy and mischievous air.

She had all the grace of a wild kid. Among people she was shy and embarrassed, but out-of-doors, bold and daring. There was nothing there in the mountains, in the heavens, or under the earth, that could frighten her.

Her skin was very fair and the wind and sun had no more effect upon it than upon the petals of a flower. Her rich blood gave her a fine, glowing color.

At home in the Valley she went barefoot or else wore some little white canvas sandals, but when she went to town, where everyone knew her and liked to look at her, she put on a pair of heavy high boots.

"What is your name?" Gracián asked.

"Mirra."

"Oh, I know that, but Mirra isn't a real name."

"It is, too," she insisted. "It's taken from the Bible. My grandmother, who always picked out very pretty names, gave it to me. My aunt's name is Flavia. I don't like that so well. But I had another aunt who died, whose name was Eleusipa. . . ."

"What?" asked Gracián, impressed.

"Eleusipa. It's a name that the country people here could never learn."

Still shaking their bottles of cream, they went around to the other side of the house where the kitchen and the servants' quarters were located.

There Gracián again saw Flavia. She was surrounded by a great flock of pigeons which were eating the grain she threw out to them. As he drew near they flew away with a gentle flutter of wings.

In the bright daylight Flavia looked even more beautiful than she had by night. Gracián was so attracted to her that in spite of his shyness he went over and held out his hand, looking into her face as if to compel her to look back at him.

Flavia threw the rest of the corn to the ground and leaving the place to the doves, took Gracián to her room. It was at the further end of the arched corridor and through the window with its iron grating one could look out over the fields. There with her own comb she smoothed out the boy's tangled hair. Then she straightened out his suit and kissed him on the forehead.

"Are you going to live with us always?" she asked.

"Yes, *señora,*" he answered.

"I'm so glad! Will you be my boy?"

"Oh yes!" said Gracián, throwing his arms around her neck in an outburst of affection.

Just then Mirra came in and Flavia, as if displeased at something, suddenly pushed the boy away from her saying:

"When the butter comes, take it to the dining room," — and shut the door.

She looked at her face in the wardrobe mirror and with the back of her hand wiped some tears from her eyes. Then she walked over to the window and looked

out into the distance, as though she longed to see something there.

On that side of the house the fields sloped gently down to a small creek from which Don Jesús led off the water for the irrigation ditches. On the other side of the creek the land rose again, forming a hill a little less steep than those further off, beyond which could be seen the bare, gray outlines of the distant mountains and the round summits of the two Giants of Achalá. The alfalfa field in front of the window was in blossom and looked as if it had been sown with violets. Yellow butterflies were drowsily pursuing one another in the field, like bright autumn leaves rising and falling in a wind, and the air was sweet with the odors of summer.

Flavia once more wiped her eyes with her hands, which were still beautiful in spite of the heavy farm work which they were accustomed to perform. Then she went again about her tasks.

Mirra and Gracián walked down to the willow grove by the dam, still shaking their bottles of cream.

Tránsito and Pastora were in the kitchen.

In the courtyard Flavia met Lazarus. She looked at him so resentfully that he hung his head and passed by her silently.

Then she spoke:

"Lazarus, why did you say that it was not Pichana who was calling last night?"

The overseer turned around, touched his hat, and answered with some embarrassment:

"I had just seen Pichana a little while before. She

was a long ways from here on the short cut to the pass."

"And why couldn't she have come here as quickly as you?"

"I was on horseback, *niña.*"

"But she never goes by the main road; she always finds short cuts. She is a witch, you know."

"Yes, *niña.*"

"She can ride through the air, you know."

"So they say. I have never seen her."

"And if it wasn't she, who was it?"

Lazarus lowered his eyes before her angry glance. She was not usually so sharp and stern.

Since he made no reply, she spoke again:

"It was Pichana, Lazarus. You may be sure of it."

"All right, *niña.*"

"You may go on to your work."

The overseer raised his eyes to look at her and then walked slowly away. As he went he heard Flavia repeat again:

"It was Pichana. You know it was."

But when he was out of sight and no one heard her, she gave a deep sigh, exclaiming:

"Heaven help me! What shall I do?"

Mirra and Gracián came back with their bottles of cream. The butter had formed and Mirra, who was experienced in these matters, took the corks out of the bottles, poured the dainty, rich mass on a hollow plate and, when the whey had run off, covered it with fresh fig leaves.

She was chattering away to the boy, who watched her every movement with admiration, as if she had known him for a long time.

"Will you eat something, if I give it to you?"

"What?"

"Roast corn!"

"Yes!"

She ran to the kitchen and came back with her apron full of ears of corn, roasted in the husk on live embers. They had been placed there early in the morning so that they might be ready for the little girl at this time. They were her favorite food.

"These should be eaten out under the willow trees," Mirra remarked sententiously. "Only ears boiled in a pot should be taken into the dining room and eaten with butter."

Gracián thought the distinction a reasonable one. He nodded and followed her back to the willow grove.

Some poplar trees were growing along the ditch leading to the reservoir from which the water for irrigating the estate was drawn, and down by the sluice-gate through which the water was released, among the watercress and the fragrant *vinagrillos,* some large willows had sunk their mighty roots. From their branches some swings had been hung. Near the sluice-gate where the hole was deepest, because the earth had been washed away by the force of the descending waters, there was one willow with a large, twisted trunk and bark so rough that Mirra could slip her whole hand into its crevices.

When the sluice-gate was shut the water in the pond was like a mirror brightly reflecting the light of the sun, whose rays like silver lances darted in through the openings between the leaves, striking the grass where the gold of the *vinagrillos* was gleaming.

Here it was that Mirra came to eat her corn undisturbed. She was so quiet that a kingfisher darted out from a branch over the water nearby to catch a little fish which was swimming down the stream, and a turtle dove cooed in the treetop over her head.

Gracián, who had followed at a little distance, came upon her sitting astride the twisted willow, her mouth full of the luscious, toasted kernels.

They were both munching on in silence when the boy, who had thrown himself full length on the grass, jumped up, terrified.

"Mirra! Mirra!" he cried.

"What's the matter?"

"Look at that old woman!"

And he pointed toward another willow, in the fork of which a ragged old negress in sordid, gray garments, was crouching like a wild cat.

"Oh! That's Pichana," said Mirra calmly, picking some ears of corn out of her lap and handing them to the boy.

"Give these to her. She won't hurt you."

"No, no. I don't want to," protested Gracián, who could not take his eyes away from the terrible apparition.

"Give them to her. She won't hurt you, I say," the

little girl repeated. "She is a poor old woman who lives by begging."

"I won't!" said Gracián, clinging to the willow.

Pichana gave a wicked laugh, as if she delighted in the boy's fear.

Mirra climbed down from her seat and ran over to the old woman with her ears of corn. Pichana stretched out an arm, thin and black as a grape-vine, and clasped the little girl's soft hand.

Then in one leap, with the agility of a cat, she jumped down from the tree, ran over to Gracián, made a pirouette, and darted away, hiding herself among the trees so that the dogs, who hated her, should not see her.

"That's Pichana," said Mirra again.

"Is she the one who screamed last night?"

"Yes. You needn't be afraid of her. She is kind-hearted and knows how to cure people. She knows the names of all the herbs and can tell what each one is good for."

"I don't care. She doesn't look a bit kind-hearted," remarked Gracián. "Did you see how she was watching us?"

"Well, what of it? She is as nosey as a fox, but she doesn't like to stay around people, and much less around dogs."

"Where does she live?"

"Some day I'll show you. It's down where there is a spring which never dries up and from which no one drinks but Pichana. She used to live in the 'Lions'

Cave' on the road from Lake Brava. There, hidden under a bramble bush, is an entrance leading to fourteen caves that reach down to the middle of the earth. Some day we'll go there, too."

"But are there any lions there?" the boy asked timidly, more and more impressed by Mirra's profound knowledge and great courage.

"No. There used to be some, but papa had them all killed because they ate his colts."

They had left the shade of the willows and were walking along together on the top of the dike, following the line of the poplar trees until they came to the creek. Here an obstruction had been built to change the course of the water.

The little girl took off her shoes and stockings and waded across the creek. Gracián picked his way over the stones.

"I am going to show you where Black Valley ends and Camargo's Hill begins."

And as if the name had suggested Flavia to her, she turned to Gracián and looking at him fixedly said:

"Tell me what my aunt said to you."

"She didn't say anything," the boy replied. He was a little ashamed of his recent display of affection.

"She kissed you, didn't she? How queer!"

"Why?"

"Because — you may not believe it — she never kisses me. She doesn't like me."

"Why not? She isn't unkind to you, is she?"

"No, she isn't. She has only lived with us about

three years. She came just a little while after mamma died. At first she was very fond of me. Then she changed."

They were ascending the little hill now. There were some small wild rose bushes and here and there a thistle half concealed in the grass, so the little girl sat down on the ground and put on her sandals.

Gracián stood watching her.

"She doesn't like you?" he said — "Why doesn't she like you?"

"No, she doesn't like me — ever since one day when I quarreled with Victoria, Camargo's daughter."

"Is he the owner of the Hill?"

"Yes, the owner of all the land west of Black Valley. You see . . ."

"Well, what happened?"

"I haven't told a single soul. I'll tell you, but you must keep it secret. Why should Flavia care about the daughter of Camargo — my father's enemy? — the enemy of us all? They say that Pichana knows things about him that no one else knows and that she doesn't tell them because he would kill her if she did."

They were a little out of breath upon reaching the crest of the hill. Stretched out before them lay Camargo's Hill, a plateau which seemed to extend as far as the Achalá mountains in the distance.

In one direction they could see a grove of carob-trees and in the midst of it a house with rose-colored walls and a straw roof.

"That's where *he* lives!" said Mirra, and the tone in

which she pronounced the word told plainly that she meant her father's enemy, whose name they never mentioned in the Valley.

Gracián looked at the house, at the avenue of trees, extending in a straight line to the distant horizon, at the stony meadows where only a few cows were grazing, and at the rippling fields of pampas grass in flower, white as a flock of sheep in the sun.

The landscape was monotonous compared with the fertile slope on which they lived, with its little river and its woods.

"I like Black Valley better," said the boy, turning to look at Señor de Viscarra's property.

"So do I, and so does *he!* So does *he!* That's why he hates us — because he says that Black Valley belongs to him, that it was once part of his land, and that our property at most only extends as far as the creek. That would leave the better part of the Valley on his side. We had a law suit; did you know that?"

"No. Is that why you quarreled?"

"Yes. Because one day Victoria said this land was hers. It is funny that she isn't out here now. She and her father spend all their time watching what is going on in Black Valley. And one day when I met her alone in the meadow she ran up and threw a stone at me saying — 'All this belongs to us!' I caught her and she bit me, so I struck her. I hit her and hit her until her nose began to bleed. Then I let her go."

"And how did your aunt find it out?"

"She saw the blood on my apron and I had to ex-

plain to her how it got there. Oh! You should have seen her! She didn't do anything to me. She didn't even speak to me. But from that day to this I have known that she doesn't like me. I wonder why she doesn't like me. What does she care about what they do over there?"

And Mirra pointed angrily to the stony hillside, the rose-colored house and the great rippling field of pampas grass which seemed to extend to the distant mountains.

It was noon before they returned home. Mirra went directly to the kitchen and Flavia, who had seen them coming from the window of her room, came out to meet Gracián. She looked first to one side and then to the other and with a strange note of excitement in her voice, which she lowered so that only Gracián could hear her, she asked:

"Did you go to Camargo's Hill?"

"Yes, *señora.*"

"Don't call me *señora,* call me 'aunt' or call me 'Flavia' unless you would like to call me 'mother.' "

"I will call you 'aunt.' Is that all right?"

"Yes, that's better. And so you went to Camargo's Hill. What did you see there?"

"We saw the meadows, the buildings, the fields of pampas grass. . . ."

"No, no! What else did you see? Didn't you see any people?"

"No, there was nobody there."

"That's strange. Nobody at all?"

"We saw Pichana down by the reservoir."

"But on Camargo's Hill . . . wasn't there anybody there?"

"No, *señora,* . . . no, aunt."

"Really! . . . well, don't tell anybody what we have been talking about, Gracián. And then I'll always love you."

She stroked his hair with her beautiful hand and moved away. The boy stood watching her until he heard Mirra calling him.

Chapter III

THUNDER IN THE NIGHT

THE two families had been enemies for years. The bad feeling had originally grown out of a dispute about the boundary between their adjoining estates up in the sierras. The question was whether the line drawn from a certain stone marker should be straight or oblique. And although the amount of land involved was negligible in comparison with the acres upon acres of fields which both the Viscarras and the Camargos possessed, the feud had been handed down from father to son.

It had grown more bitter as a result of an event which occurred when Don Jesús de Viscarra was still a small boy.

The family was living at the time on the ranch in the hills. One winter night when the solitary house seemed even lonelier than usual with the cold wind howling outside, they heard a sudden furious knocking at the door. They were about to open it when they became suspicious because the dogs barked so angrily and so wildly, and they decided to keep quiet and trust to the heavy wooden timbers of the door to keep their unknown visitors out. Their hope was vain. Four ban-

dits, led by a man who had a black handkerchief tied over his face like a mask, forced open the door, by backing their horses into it. They seized and bound the mistress of the house, then sacked the place while she looked on helpless. The children cowered in the shadows, almost frightened to death.

The peons of the ranch were nowhere to be found. They were either cowards or accomplices of the bandits. The widow suspected that the intruders had had dealings with her servants — a thing which would have been impossible if they had come from any great distance — and from the height and general bearing of the man with the mask and from his anxiety to conceal himself, she was convinced that their leader was no other than Camargo's oldest son.

As a result of the experience the poor lady fell ill with a sickness which proved to be fatal, and the whole family was obliged to move to a less deserted part of the country. They came to Black Valley, where they had another large estate, and after a few years this passed into the hands of Don Jesús.

But here, too, they were neighbors of the Camargos, for the ancestors of both families had bought their land jointly and their descendants continued to inherit adjacent property. And here, too, there was an old quarrel about the boundary line, which kept alive the bad feeling between them.

The land in question here was more valuable than the property up among the hills, for it included the greater part of the valley and the whole course of the stream

which ran through it, supplying the water for irrigating the fields. The row of stone markers which had originally divided the two estates clearly included the land in "Camargo's Hill," as it was called, but a private document had been drawn up between the first owners, changing the line and ceding the disputed portion to the Viscarra family. On this document, which had been lost for years, Don Jesús based his claim to the property. The claim had been sustained and he had occupied the valley without saying anything to the Camargo heir.

Don Jesús was much older than the blond young chap with blue eyes and surly manners who rode past him haughtily whenever they chanced to meet. In fact, though Don Pablo was the younger brother of the alleged leader of the band of "robbers," he had been born after the attack on the lonely house in the mountains. Years had passed, the older Camargo brother had died, and probably Don Jesús would now have seen no reason why the two families should live at enmity with each other. But with the Hill Don Pablo had inherited the now traditional hatred of the Camargos for the Viscarras, and was not minded to forget that his neighbors had accused his dead brother of the assault on the Viscarra homestead.

One power only could have shaken his resentment. This was his love for Flavia de Viscarra, Don Jesús' younger sister. He had become acquainted with her in Cosquín. She was seventeen years old at that time and unusually beautiful, with a refined loveliness sug-

gestive of the generations of gentlewomen who were her ancestors.

But Don Jesús was head of the family and Flavia's guardian, and he refused absolutely to give his consent to an engagement between them, for Don Pablo had not only behaved with hostility toward him, but had also the reputation of being a wild young fellow.

The affair was broken off and in order to separate his sister from her lover Don Jesús sent her to live with some relatives whom he scarcely knew, whose home was in a little village hidden away among the hills. Here she stayed for years, cherishing a silent resentment against him.

It was not until after Don Jesús' wife died that Flavia, at his request, returned to Black Valley. The bloom of her youth had passed and she had given up all thought of marriage. She was quiet and often sad, but she was a capable housekeeper and her brother, now that she made her home with him, thought no more of the old love affair.

Meanwhile Camargo lived on his ranch on the Hill, alone, except for a little girl, somewhat younger than Mirra, who looked as if she might be his daughter.

Don Jesús paid no attention to his neighbor. He spent all his time looking after his ranch, "Black Valley," which under his initiative and industry was constantly improving. He had greatly augmented the number of his cattle and his flocks of sheep and goats were now pastured at different places all along the Yuspe river.

One night when Lazarus came back from Cosquín, he said to his master, who was seated at the table:

"They say that to-day Don Pablo swore that he was going to kill you."

Don Jesús shrugged his shoulders. Lazarus added:

"It seems he had been drinking. He was in the *Cafe del Molle.*"

Don Jesús said nothing. He felt only contempt for the threat. He had never used arms and he was resolved never to use them. A streak of fatalism in his blood made him believe that everything is foreordained and that no human effort can break the chain of destiny.

The next night, a few days after Gracián's arrival, Señor de Viscarra announced at the supper table:

"To-day Camargo brought suit against me for the possession of Black Valley."

The sentence fell in silence. Flavia probably did not know what to say, for they never discussed these matters. Gracián, who happened to be looking at her, noticed the same anxious shadow in her eyes which he had seen there on the night of his arrival when they heard Pichana scream.

And as if his thought had evoked the apparition of the fearful old hag, at that instant there rose again from the valley the same terrible cry.

Don Jesús jumped up with clenched fists. Then he made a visible effort to control himself and sat down again.

Lazarus came in, hat in hand.

"Unchain the dogs and send Amoroso with them to

see who is prowling around the carob grove," said his master. It was a strange command, for there seemed to be no doubt that it was Pichana, and if the dogs were let loose they would surely catch the old woman and tear her to pieces.

They could hear the two beasts barking and they could see the dark form of Amoroso cross the road and disappear among the trees. Then Don Jesús took up his former theme and proceeded to enlarge upon it to Flavia and the two children, whose distracted thoughts scarcely followed him.

He was not worried, he said, although he knew Camargo to be capable of acting rashly. Don Pablo was, in fact, a notoriously good shot. People said that he had discovered a cattle thief on his land one day in the act of slaughtering a heifer. He was at a considerable distance from the man, but without dismounting he had whipped out his revolver and laid the thief in his tracks with a single shot. At court the murder had been represented as an act of self-defense, and as the young man had influence, the affair had been hushed up.

Gracián had gradually become accustomed to sleeping alone, but that night he felt strangely uneasy.

He went out into the courtyard and looked up at the threatening sky. All day long a hot wind had been blowing from the north, making strange noises as it whistled past the house. At nightfall it changed its direction. Furious gusts came up from the south, sweeping heavy clouds, jagged with lightning, before them.

Señor de Viscarra had retired to his room. Mirra, who was sleeping with Flavia, had gone to bed, tired out, as soon as supper was over. Gracián himself had started to retire. He was crossing the arched corridor in a wind that beat against the pillars and tore the flowers from the honeysuckle vine, when, groping in the darkness for the latch to his door, he saw Amoroso steal past him like a shadow on his way to Flavia's room.

For a moment Gracián thought that some harm might come to the young woman who had treated him so kindly and he stood watching the peon with terrified eyes. But Amoroso did not enter the room. He remained on the threshold and Gracián saw Flavia come out and stand beside him for a moment. Then the peon vanished into the darkness.

Gracián did not move. He watched Flavia come slowly down the corridor in his direction. She did not notice him for he was still dressed in mourning and was standing in the shadow of his door. He could see plainly that she was very much agitated.

"Heavenly Father!" he heard her say. "Was my sin so great?"

And she passed close by him without seeing him. Then, like a storm bird which only leaves its nest in times of tempest, he saw her walk out through the courtyard, her clothes beaten by the wind, her steps uncertain, like those of a person walking in his sleep, her face lit up by the flashes of lightning which ceased as soon as the rain began to fall.

Then she turned back, reëntered the arcade and shut herself up in her room.

Gracián was overcome with fatigue and soon went to bed, leaving his window open, through which the lightning was still flashing.

Toward midnight a clap of thunder roused him out of a troubled sleep. He got up to close the window and as he moved the shutters he heard Mirra's voice in the passageway.

He opened the door and the little girl silently threw her arms around his neck.

"Did you hear it, Gracián?"

"Yes, it was a thunderclap."

"No — it was a shot."

"No, no! It was thunder. It woke me up."

"Me, too. But I'm sure it was a shot. And what do you think? She isn't in the room!"

"Who isn't?"

"She — Flavia."

The two children stood silent, their minds dilating with terror, trying to string into some order and meaning these things that were happening about them.

"You just imagined that, Mirra."

"No, I'm sure of it. She isn't in her room . . . and I'm afraid! What can she be doing out-of-doors?"

The rain, which had been falling gently, now began to pour down in big splashing drops which struck the outside row of stones in the floor of the arcade with a sound like the jingle of bells. The wind died down

and the lightning became more diffuse. It lit up the one great transparent cloud which covered the whole sky.

Gracián was the first to become calm.

"Don't be afraid, Mirra," he said, and he kissed her cheeks which were cold and damp from the rain.

Then, feeling that there was some mystery here which they could not understand, he added:

"If Flavia has gone out, she'll be back soon. You mustn't let her find you here, Mirra."

The little girl slipped back to her room without making a sound. Gracián lay down again and fell into a deep sleep, lulled by the monotonous gurgling of the water in the rain pipes.

The next morning they both thought that they must have dreamt it all. There was not a cloud in the sky above the valley, though in the distance a great gray veil seemed to enshroud the world. There was only one rent in it, to the south, through which they could see the dark outline of the mountains. Later in the day the fog crept up and filled the valley, too. It hung big drops, round and shining as the eyes of a toad, on the blades of grass in the meadows.

"There is going to be another storm," said Mirra. She had risen late and met Gracián as he was on his way to the stable to see the women finish milking the cows.

They went out together, each carrying a tin cup, until they came to the animals whose milk they knew would be richest and most fragrant. There they saw Flavia.

Her eyes were heavy from lack of sleep and she looked pale. She smiled at Gracián and filled first his cup and then Mirra's with the warm, foaming liquid. The two children exchanged glances, their minds full of the scenes of the previous night. They drank the milk. Then the little girl ran into the kitchen to look after her roast corn. She soon came back and took Gracián to show him how the creek was swollen.

Their feet sank deep in the wet paths. Here and there little rivulets formed by the rain had washed over the stones in the roadway, making walking difficult. The little streams gurgled pleasantly as they hurried along to join the muddy current of the creek which flowed on down to the distant Yuspe.

The two children climbed barefoot on to a high rock, which thrust itself out from the edge of the creek like a great claw, in order to see the swollen water. The stream had become a river of turbulent, foamy mud. Tangled branches had fallen into it, had been dragged along for a time, and then, stripped of their bark and covered with slime, had been cast with other refuse into the backwater.

This muddy torrent did not in the least resemble the sparkling stream of every day with lacy cress and *vinagrillos* edging its banks, and water as clear as crystal for the whole ranch to drink.

Mirra had perched herself on the topmost point of the rock, and was throwing little sticks into the water, watching them sink and then bob up again.

"One of our dogs," she said, "will swim out after sticks and fetch them back. His name is Dogo."

As she spoke she remembered that she had not seen him tied up as usual. Rayo, the other watchdog was there, but Dogo was missing.

Later on, when they took their roast corn down by the dam, Mirra discovered why.

He lay there dead at the foot of a willow tree, his throat pierced by a bullet.

At the little girl's cry, Gracián, who had been lagging behind her, came running up.

"They have killed him!" she cried. "Why do you suppose they did it?" And both of them immediately connected the death of the dog with the mysterious events of the previous night.

Gracián touched the dog's body and found it cold and wet. The rain must have fallen on it all night long.

The little girl's face was flushed with indignation.

"He was the bravest of all the watchdogs," she said. "The man who killed him knew why he picked him out instead of the other one."

She said "the man who killed him" and both of them assumed that it was a man, although they could not have said why.

They lifted the dog by the paws and carried him back to the courtyard, where their appearance produced great astonishment.

"There's some mischief on foot," was all that Señor de Viscarra said.

When everybody had examined the dog and wondered at the skill of the man who had fired the shot, Mirra proposed that they throw the body into the creek and let the current carry it away.

So with sorrowful faces the two children carried it back to the bank of the stream and with a mighty effort flung it from the projecting rock into the water. The current first sucked it in and then threw it up again to the surface further down stream. The little girl watched it being jostled along, and her eyes were full of tears.

"Poor Dogo!" she said.

A fine cold rain had begun to fall. The wind swept it hither and thither like strands of hair. Tiny wet crystal drops as fine as dust covered everything.

Mirra and Gracián started for the house. At the entrance to the cattle pen they overtook Amoroso who had followed them but had returned home more quickly than they.

As they passed him Mirra tossed her head and said angrily:

"You act as if you were glad that the dog is dead."

"No, *niña,* I am not glad," answered the peon, stepping aside to let them pass.

He was altogether repulsive. His hair, matted by the rain, hung down over his face. The palms of his hairy hands, which he had just scrubbed, were as red as raw flesh. He walked with stooped shoulders and his arms hung down to his knees. He never wore a hat. When the sun shone he would tie a handkerchief

about his forehead with a strip of colored cloth which Flavia had given him.

Flavia had brought him up, and with her he was as faithful and docile as a dog. Although he looked like a man of middle age, he was scarcely twenty-three. He had been given to Flavia when he was only a little boy. She was a young girl at that time and very fond of raising little wild animals. And such Amoroso seemed to her. Nobody seemed to know where he had come from, for he had passed from one master to another until he finally fell into the girl's hands and she took pity on him.

From then on he was always at her side, ready to serve her in any possible way. It was not hard to imagine that if she had asked it of him, he would cheerfully have died for her, without thinking that he was doing anything extraordinary. His mind did not go beyond the simple idea of serving his mistress.

When Flavia returned to Black Valley, Señor de Viscarra gave her permission to bring him with her and put him to work on the ranch, for he knew how to break the most spirited colt and could do various kinds of out-door work.

So Amoroso came to Black Valley and this is the story which Mirra told Gracián that morning when they passed him with a strange smile on his homely face.

As the wind grew stronger Gracián noticed again that strange sound which he had heard the night before during the storm. It did not come from the valley. It seemed rather to come from far away — from below

the surface of the earth — and it had uncanny modulations.

He knew that there must be some fantastic explanation for it and that many of the stories which were told around the fire on winter nights had been inspired by this strange roaring of the wind. He asked Mirra to tell him what she knew about it.

"As soon as the sun comes out," said the little girl, who knew all the legends of the neighborhood, "I'll show you where the sound comes from."

"Where the wind roars!" added Gracián fascinated.

"The very first sunny day," Mirra repeated, looking up at the heavy ashen clouds which crowned the hills enclosing the valley.

Chapter IV

IN THE LIONS' CAVE

SEÑOR DE VISCARRA announced one night that he was going to take another trip into the sierras on the following day if the weather was fair. His brother had grown tired of his lonely life up in the deserted hills and had decided to sell off a good share of his stock and take the rest to another part of the country. Don Jesús intended to buy from him a flock of sheep and a large number of cows.

On her way to bed Mirra went over and whispered to Gracián, her eyes sparkling with anticipation:

"That's fine! If he goes away to-morrow and the sun comes out at siesta time, I'll take you to the place where the wind roars!"

The boy dreamt all night of strange, weird chasms and rose earlier than usual, feeling as if he were going on a real adventure.

The earth lay wrapped in the milky light of early dawn. The shadows had not yet been driven from the valley, but rosy streaks in the sky overhead told him that the sun was rising.

On the ragged tops of the farthest mountains, whose crests caught the first shafts of the daylight, confused

wrinkles were reshaping themselves in sharp light and shadow. The jagged clouds which had been drowsing on their summits, were suffused with purple. Into the valley sifted a warm breath of wind.

Suddenly above the rugged hill covered with ferns and broom-weed, rose a great disc of brilliant, burnished silver, glowing like a splendid furnace and making sparkle the millions of diamonds which the night had sown lavishly on the meadows.

And all the time, as if nothing ever changed, one could hear the eternal murmur of the stream as it slipped away between the rocks.

Gracián went to look for Mirra and found her in the corral milking the goats with the help of a little mulatto girl.

Far away one could see the herd, a picturesque, moving spot of color.

The corral was surrounded by a stone wall and the ground inside was covered with balls the size of coffee-beans which the restless hoofs of the inquisitive goats kept grinding to pieces. There was a small pen at one side to keep the little kids away from their mothers.

Some of the goats were standing against the wall to warm themselves in the first rays of the sun and some had climbed up on projecting stones where it seemed impossible that they could keep their footing.

A dog began to bark furiously when Gracián appeared and the goats all whirled around to look at him. They stood in a line munching their fodder, their noses to the wind, their slanting eyes fixed upon him. As

soon as he started to enter the gate, they ran away — a noisy, motley crowd — and the dog barked more angrily than ever.

"Come on in," said Mirra. "A barking dog never bites, you know. So long as you don't touch the goats you are perfectly safe."

In her white dress, with her two black braids thrown over her shoulders, Mirra made a brave and charming figure as she went about among the jostling goats. She seized one of them by the horns, hobbled it to keep it quiet and began to milk it with her strong, graceful little hands.

Then she opened the door of the smaller pen and let in the kid, that knelt down and began to suck its mother, its stubby tail trembling with eager joy.

Señor de Viscarra had risen very early and after drinking a few cups of *mate* for breakfast he rode away, casting a doubtful glance at the sky, which looked a little threatening.

When Mirra saw him disappear down the winding road she clapped her hands joyfully, for her father for some time had forbidden her to go on excursions outside of the valley and she was obliged to do her exploring while he was away, when she knew that Flavia would not notice her absence.

"Siesta time, when everybody is asleep, is the best time for us to go. Then they won't miss us until nightfall," she said.

Just then they heard the rapid trot of Amoroso's mule. He was accompanying his master with his

saddle-bags full of provisions to be used in case they were forced to camp out over night.

"They have really gone now!" cried Mirra and she ran down toward the dam. Gracián followed her, caught into the glow of her enthusiasm.

The sun was still turning to gold the transparent wings of the dragon-flies and the webs which the spiders had hung on the bushes. The dew was not yet dry and the meadows glistened as if they were sprinkled with bits of glass. The little girl ran through them, getting her feet wet in her delight.

The boy watched her, thinking to himself that she was even lovelier than these mountains and flowers of which he was growing so fond.

"You are pale to-day, Mirra," he said taking her hand to make her turn around.

"Never mind!" answered the little girl, who really did not have her usual color. "I know what is good for pale children."

On the other side of the alfalfa field, near a crumbling old stone wall covered over with thorn-apple branches to keep out the sheep, there was a square plot overgrown with little red flowers whose petals fell off in one's hand and stained one's fingers.

Mirra led the boy over to it. First she showed him the *santalucías* which looked like so many blue butterflies and which held in their calices drops of moisture that is said to be good for the eyes. Then she made him pick some of the red *sanguinarias* and rubbed her cheeks with them.

"Look!" she said eagerly. "Am I pale now?" And she turned around and faced him. He had never seen her look so sweet. With an emotion quite new to him he bent over and kissed her.

Her cheeks no longer needed the carmine of the flowers to give them color. A burning blush spread over them, though she could not have said why.

They walked back to the house in silence. Their way led them across a cornfield. It had been planted late, but the recent rains had made it fresh and thriving. The ears were beginning to form on some of the stalks and a yellow tassel appeared at the tops of the tallest.

Mirra remembered as she walked along that she had heard her father say the day before:

"This corn won't be ripe before the first frost."

And the thought of the coming winter was immediately linked in her mind with the end of Gracián's vacation and his return to school.

She wanted to ask him if he would forget her after he left, but she did not dare.

It was the custom for everyone in Señor de Viscarra's household to take a siesta during the hot hours of the afternoon. And in order that they all might rest and feel no anxiety about the little girl, Mirra was shut up in her room and forced to go to sleep in spite of her protests. For years she had hated this imprisonment during the glorious hours which she might have spent out in the orchard or down by the willows, throw-

ing stones at the angry geese or chasing the cicadas who were chanting the glory of summer.

So every absence of her father's was a holiday, for then she could escape while the rest were asleep and do as she liked.

After lunch Gracián went down to the creek to wait for her. She was to meet him there as soon as she could get away.

The sunshine poured down upon the great rocks and the air above them vibrated as if from the heat of an oven.

Two peons who had been sent out to repair the fences were asleep face downward in the shade of an old tree, their heads covered to protect them from the big green flies that were buzzing about in circles above them.

And along the edge of the stream, on the sand that sparkled as if sown with precious stones, the geese stalked lazily away from the pond, stopping now and then to preen themselves.

Suddenly a cool wind began to blow, stirring the drowsy landscape to life. The geese spread their wings, honked hoarsely, and alighted one by one in the backwater. They looked like a painting on a frieze with their necks arched, their bills open to catch minnows, and their furled tails serving as rudders.

Mirra came down carrying her sandals in her hand.

"Nobody saw me," she said. "Let's go around by the pasture."

They followed the course of the stream for a little

way, wading through the water when the bank was too stony, and then crossed the pasture trampling down the brittle grass that had been parched by the heat.

In the wall was a gate opening out on the fields and Gracián stepped ahead to unfasten it. He stopped horrified.

On a flat stone which had been placed there to keep the earth from being dug away by the hoofs of the cattle, lay a thick, copper-colored snake. It was sunning itself and lying in wait for some of the little toads which hopped about at the foot of the wall. It raised its triangular head at this sudden disturbance of its peace.

Mirra came up, looked at the reptile and at Gracián standing there pale, motionless, and dumb.

"Haven't you ever killed a snake?" she asked as she looked around for a club.

"Never," Gracián answered.

Mirra picked up a strong dry stick, broke off the twigs and took a firm hold on it.

"Watch me!" she said drawing nearer, and as he bent over to pick up some stones she stopped him with a gesture:

"No, not with those. You'll make it run away."

The viper raised its head still higher, opened its mouth and darted out its horrible little forked tongue.

"Take that!" cried the girl, dealing it a sharp blow. The stick broke in two, the snake uncoiled its slippery body, but before it could make its escape, Mirra hit it again with the piece of wood which she still held in her

hands, crushing its head before the astonished eyes of Gracián, who stood watching her, helplessly holding his two useless stones.

With a few more blows she cut its body in pieces.

"It keeps on twisting about, but it is really dead," she said lifting it up by her stick like a piece of rope.

"I will throw it where no one will step on it," she added, "for even the bones of a snake are poisonous."

Gracián suggested an abandoned vizcacha-hole at the foot of the wall.

"And I go barefoot so often! Just suppose I had stepped on it!"

The boy looked down at the little girl's pink feet in their new sandals and thought that it really would have been a pity if a bone of the evil creature had touched them.

Mirra must have guessed his thoughts for she laughed happily.

They climbed the first hill, then another, and another. All of them were shelving, stony, and covered with scrubby, hostile-looking trees — *chañares* with their golden fruit whose coarse, mealy pulp is good for the chest, and *piquillines* with their long thorns like crossed lances protecting the red and purple berries.

At each tree they stopped for a moment, like two bees, gathered some of the fruit and passed on.

"Come on! Come on!"

Gracián had made himself a walking stick from the dry branch of a tree and Mirra, seeing the perspiration standing out on his forehead, had filled his cap with the

fresh leaves of the wild peach. The sun did not trouble her at all for it was an old friend.

As they rounded a little grove of coca bushes, they passed Pichana. Gracián slid a trembling hand into Mirra's firm one. They greeted the old woman, whose ragged silhouette, flapping tattered garments, justified her nickname Pichana or "old scrubby."

"Ah! Hello to the children!" she called. "So they come out at siesta time like the lizards, do they?"

"We're going to the Lions' Cave," answered Mirra with a beaming face.

And she added in a low voice to Gracián:

"She is coming from her cabin, which we will pass farther on. It's in the last gorge on the way down to the river."

When they reached the gorge Gracián was tired out, though Mirra was still as fresh and smiling as one of the *santalucías* which she had picked for a bouquet.

They threw themselves down on two dark flat rocks, which had been sleeping for ages there on the edge of the gorge and which the superstitious peasants went out of their way to avoid.

An erratic wind, seeming to blow first from the north and then from the south, droned in their ears and drowned out their words.

"There it is!" said Mirra and she pointed to a small hut below them. They began to climb down toward the river. The side of the gorge was so steep that the cows grazing on it looked as if they were hanging on a wall.

They had reached a damp spot surrounded by great rocks covered with lichens which Mirra called "the rock's beard" and which she said would stop the bleeding of a wound.

Molle-trees and coca bushes bristling with thorns were growing in the fissures.

The wind had died down. There were many birds flying about and now and then they could see on the ground the furtive shadow of a hawk soaring high up in the air and they could hear its shrill scream like the creaking of a rusty weather-vane.

Gracián was thirsty and Mirra, who knew all the resources of the hills, found a pool formed by the rain falling into a hollow of clean bare rock. And there the two drank — the girl out of the palm of her hand, the boy with his mouth to the clear cool water. He could see the dead leaves and even the little bugs which lay in the pool's sandy bottom and he had to blow away the tiny spiders which were busy weaving their webs above its trembling surface.

The eastern end of the ravine opened out upon a green, level plain, and near the river a solitary tree, a lonely, melancholy poplar, stood out in sharp silhouette.

Gracián refused to go near the tumble-down hut and they turned their heads away as they passed it, as if they feared that the old hag whom they had met in the ravine might by some magic have returned to her sordid lodging. Her dog, which was tied to the door, barked at them maliciously.

When they finally reached the river the boy sighed.

"I can't go any farther," he said, looking for a bowlder in whose shade he might rest.

A breeze as sweet as a draught of water blew down the narrow pass. The river ran noisily and impetuously along until it reached a great sandy shoal where it spread out languorously on the softness of the golden bed. Only at one side, against the rock, a single current kept a tranquil force, bearing along in flecks of white its fragile bubbles of foam.

Here the cows often came to drink, and when they had had enough, they would lie down on the sand slowly chewing their cud — the gray rocks, the green meadow, and the distant mountains, all reflected in their gentle eyes.

Mirra, indefatigable, her face flushed and her hat hanging by its ribbon down her back, sat down to take off her sandals.

"We must take our shoes off," she said. "To get to the place where we are going we either have to walk over the rocks in the river or wade through the water.

Gracián took off his shoes and hung them over the stick which he was carrying over his shoulder. With renewed enthusiasm he followed Mirra as she jumped from one shapeless stone to another or resolutely waded in water up to her knees where the river bottom was sandy.

He could never quite catch up with her. Her little feet seemed shod with wings.

How pretty she was! He thought of the approach-

ing end of his vacation, of the restricted life at school, and of the coming summer when he would return to find her older and changed, perhaps.

A question rose to his lips, but he refrained from asking it, just as she had done that morning.

They were no longer walking in the sunshine, for great, white clouds had spread over the sky. Suddenly, pierced with horror to the marrow of his bones, Gracián heard a frightful roar. He stopped still, wondering what it could be.

"It's the wind roaring through the ravine," said Mirra. "It was just a sudden gust. It's over now."

And it had in fact been followed by an impressive silence.

The path led between two enormous crags of reddish stone. It looked as if the mountain had been cut open and had poured its life's blood out into the golden water which flowed down to become lost in larger rivers, in some distant reservoir, or perhaps in some unknown sea.

High up in the air, so high that the children had to shade their eyes with their hands in order to see them, two dark gray eagles sat on a white *quebracho*-tree, brooding upon the solitude.

A second gust of wind swept through the ravine and again the roaring was heard — nearer and more terrifying.

Gracián sidled up to Mirra, who was scrutinizing the landscape.

"I am afraid," he said.

"Gracián! Don't be foolish!" the little girl answered, and he did not complain again.

She was scanning the bank from a rock in the bed of the river.

"There's the place!" she cried suddenly. "There are the caves!" and she jumped to the bank like a wild kid, slipped past the blackberry bushes which spread out thorny branches to hold her back, between the cocas, and disappeared from the sight of the astonished Gracián as completely as if the mountain had swallowed her.

He heard her voice from behind a clump of fragrant *peperina,* announcing that she had found the caves. It was not easy to enter them. The opening was only a crevice half covered by underbrush and inside it was as dark as a bottomless pit.

But Mirra was there and so Gracián followed, crawling head downward along the inclined plane formed by a flat bowlder. Suddenly he lost his footing. He could not hold himself back but rolled to the ground which he was surprised to find extraordinarily dry.

Mirra burst out laughing and her laughter echoed through all the fourteen caves which, according to the tradition, extended one after the other down to the center of the earth. The boy looked uneasily around the great cavern, fearful lest one of the lions which had formerly dwelt there might have taken a fancy to come back to his lair.

The caves adjoined each other in a downward slant. Some were low and narrow, others broad and sonorous

as temples, and all had innumerable stalactite pendants hanging from their roofs. But there was no light to explore them by, and by the time they reached the second cave even Mirra felt a little frightened when she heard again that strange roaring of the wind in the ravine which had given rise to so many legends and which seemed to roll upward from below the trembling earth.

It was impossible to leave by the way they had come in, for the entrance was guarded by that smooth sloping bowlder twelve or fourteen feet high.

But in the second cave there was a fissure forming a narrow, difficult passageway over and between crumbling, yellow rocks toward the light which a *churqui* was veiling.

The children groped their way toward this opening. Gracián found it first and crawled out into the open air and the sunlight.

He was pale when Mirra reached him and he pointed toward the west.

"Look at the sky!"

Without their realizing it, night had begun to fall and the south wind was piling up clouds in the path of the sun.

They began to climb up the side of the gorge, but when after great efforts they reached the top, Mirra, who had been joking and laughing, grew serious.

She had never seen a sunset like this one. A fringe of purple along the horizon made the mountains look as if they were on fire and the piles of slate-colored

clouds with glowing edges might have been smoke above the flames.

The wind was blowing from the southeast and flocks of black ducks were following the course of the river.

"There is going to be a storm to-night," Mirra said seriously. "We'd better go home."

It was too late!

At that moment a terrific gust of wind shook the tall *quebracho*-trees and snatched off Mira's little straw hat. It fluttered about for an instant like a wounded dove and then disappeared from sight.

A prolonged roar from the chasm below told them that the wind was shut up in the narrow basin where the waters of the river slept before starting on their cold dark journey down to the foamy cascades.

The rain began to fall in slanting lines like crystal threads. Some drops flattened out against the rocks with a gentle splash.

The boy sat down and began to cry. Mirra took his hand. Her own eyes were full of tears.

"Let's go down again, Gracián. We can't walk any farther here."

And she pointed to the perpendicular wall of rock which blocked their path.

"Let's go down into the caves again until the rain is over."

Gracián followed her in silence. She climbed down without looking at the black surface of the water beneath her. It had begun to grow restless and it broke into little waves of yellow foam, as if its unfathomable

waters were being stirred from below by some infernal wind.

Mirra had lost her sandals and Gracián had thrown away his stick and shoes. They were in his way as he climbed over the slippery rocks. There was almost nothing against which he could brace himself. Sometimes they had to cross a tangle of undergrowth between the rocks where thorns embedded in the soft earth formed by centuries of decaying matter scratched their feet and they were obliged to cling to the vines to save themselves from falling into the gorge below.

When they reached the entrance to the caves the rain was coming down in sheets and forming muddy torrents that leaped down the sides of the ravine to be swallowed instantly by the river.

And the wind was still roaring.

Without a word the children slid through the crevice and fell almost simultaneously onto the sandy floor of the cave.

Mirra's nerves were overwrought and she began to cry quietly, trying to hide her tears from Gracián.

Outside there raged one of those theatrical storms which are seen only in the mountains, a storm constantly increasing in fury, with terrible crashes of thunder repeated twenty times over by the echoes in the gorge and innumerable flashes of lightning wrapping the landscape in sulphurous flames.

Sometimes, when the wind roared outside, the children thought that a lion must be approaching. Sometimes it sounded more like the cry of a human being

and then Mirra remembered that she had heard that at times like this a little island rose from the quiet waters of the lake and a woman with braids of golden hair appeared there, luring to her men who had lost their way.

Her disobedience in setting out on this adventure weighed heavily on the child's conscience. She did not think that Flavia would worry — at least not about her — perhaps about Gracián. But she knew how displeased her father would be when he heard of it and she tortured herself trying to think of some way of keeping it from him.

Little by little her fears diminished. She knew the first cave well and by feeling around she found a shelf on which she could sit and lean back against the rock. Gracián threw himself on the sand at her feet.

Two or three times she spoke to him without receiving an answer. She began to be hurt and angry until she felt the pressure of his head against her knees and realized that he had fallen asleep.

Night must already have fallen, but it was so dark in the cave that it was impossible to judge the darkness outside.

In her imagination Mirra could see Gracián's closed eyes, his pale, gentle face, his tousled hair and all the features of the handsome head that now lay weary in her lap, and she knew that she was the stronger of the two, that she must think for him, must love for him — that he would never accomplish anything unless guided by her hand.

"Oh Gracián, Gracián . . . !"

Many years later Mirra remembered that night with its vague forebodings and its mysterious sensation of awakening love and she knew that she had been right and that Gracián had always needed her to help him find the way. . . .

It must have been still quite a while before dawn when the howling of the wind subsided and Mirra heard someone calling her name.

"Mirra, Mirra! Where are you?"

She gave a shout of joy which wakened Gracián, and wild with eagerness they both began to grope their way out, crying to their rescuer not to leave them.

It was pitch dark when they crawled out. The heavy rain had ceased, but a persistent drizzle was still falling and the river had become a swollen, foamy torrent.

By the light of a flash of lightning Mirra saw who it was who had come for them.

"Pichana, Gracián, Pichana!"

And it was indeed the old woman with her ragged clothing soaked and clinging to her bony body. She had started out in search of them as soon as she had heard from one of the peons that they were missing from Black Valley.

"Pichana knows how to get to her cabin quicker than along by the river," she said, stroking Mirra's hair. "Come this way. Pichana will make a fire and tell you stories and we'll pass the night in good company."

And the old woman began to lead them by the light of the flashes of lightning along a goat-path. Mirra

followed her and Gracian came after, sometimes treading on the little girl's heels when she stopped to feel whether there were any thorns before she ventured to take the next step.

Pichana slipped through the underbrush like a snake. She knew every turn of the path, every stone, every thorny bush, and she would turn around from time to time to warn them:

"Let the children take care! Here is a rock! They might slip here!"

Chapter V

FLAVIA'S EYES

"IN other days," said Señor de Viscarra, "there were neither rich nor poor here." He was sitting in a wicker chair in the *galería.* It was siesta time, but he had given up his nap since the weather had grown cooler. Pastora had placed the firepot in a corner to protect it from the wind, and was brewing him sweet *mate* upon it.

The person to whom Don Jesús was speaking was a middle-aged peasant, pale and thin, with a meek, indolent countenance. He was miserably dressed and his bare feet were shod with *usutas,* oval pieces of untanned leather which he had tied on with little straps, or *tientos.*

He stood listening with great deference to Don Jesús' words, restlessly fingering the patched hat he held in his blood-stained hands. He had just come from the "slaughtering" where he had been helping the peons in exchange for a share of the "scraps."

Since winter was coming on, Señor de Viscarra had decided to slaughter an animal and put away a store of jerked beef for the cold weather.

"Take the red heifer — she is barren," he told the overseer.

And at noon Amoroso, who had gone out to the woods to look for the animal whose sterility condemned her, came in driving the cattle he had found in the salt lick. The red heifer was among them. He lassoed her and tied her to the paling back of the buildings until after luncheon.

Whenever they slaughtered an animal on the estancia someone would always pass the word around the neighborhood to those miserable peasants who lived by the grace of God in wretched straw huts on borrowed land, enduring hunger and poverty, but happy in their inconceivable idleness. And when the time came for the animal to be butchered there would happen along a ragged old woman, two or three emaciated children, or sometimes even the head of the family himself, to pay their respects to the master and beg for some of the "scraps" that might be left over.

Don Jesús always grew angry at the sight of the first of these "vultures," as he called them. He would curse the talkativeness of his peons who told all the idlers in the country what was going on on the estate, so that they would all congregate there and shamelessly beg for the leavings. But these he always let them have — the heart, the lungs, the intestines, from which they made tripe, the head, tongue and tail, and three of the feet. The fourth Mirra kept for herself for she liked to roast it and eat the marrow.

And invariably, when the one who came for the spoils was the head of a family or a mature person able to work, Don Jesús would call him aside and reprove him

at length for the idleness which condemned him and his family to perish of want in a land of plenty.

The peasants would listen to him attentively, agreeing to everything he said with a "Yes, indeed!" "That's so!" "You are right!" and seldom offering even the feeblest objection — but they never reformed.

"In former times," Señor de Viscarra was saying, "there were neither rich nor poor. Here in the mountains everyone had his own piece of land, his own flock of goats, his calves, his horses, a poultry yard, and in summer his cornfields and gourd vines. But those were industrious people who helped each other, as God commands us to. When there was a wall to be built around a clearing, the neighbors turned out and built it together. Each one took his turn at helping and at being helped. Of course some were better off than others. Some had two, three, or five yoke of oxen and others none. But at planting time the poorer neighbors worked in the others' fields on condition that later they might borrow the oxen to plow their own. And so everyone's fields were cultivated and there was no family, however poor, that had not saved up for the winter its strings of dried gourd, a plentiful supply of corn for meal, and shelves loaded with cheeses."

"That's right!" the peasant agreed.

And Señor de Viscarra continued his fine words about the advantages of mutual help, which was really no more than the fulfillment of one's Christian duty, until a boy who ran errands for the peons came up and announced that the cow had been slaughtered and that

unless they hurried to get the scraps the dogs would have them all eaten up. Then the peasant thanked him and hastened away for his share. He helped himself to the meat, hung it over his horse's flanks, and rode off followed by some filthy tick-ridden dogs that shared his privations with him.

From the slaughtered animal the hide was removed and stretched out on the ground to dry in the sun. It was a matter of pride to the man who had done the skinning that not the slightest cut should appear in the hide.

This time they had not removed it in a single piece, for Amoroso had asked permission to take off a strip from around the neck. He wanted to make some traces for yoking the oxen and this was the best way to obtain them.

The carcass hung from the thick branch of a carob-tree which shaded the spot. A little dog was licking up the blood as it dripped to the ground while the larger dogs, growling and showing their teeth, devoured the distended stomach and the gall-bladder, which no one wanted, paying no heed to the birds picking at the ground round about them.

Two or three peons with sharp knives were carving off chunks of the meat, cutting it into long slices and stretching it out in the sun to dry. Amoroso took the strip of hide from around the neck and went into the kitchen to work it.

The two children were there near the "baking pan," an old clay pot, placed over the coals, in which the cook

was making pop-corn for them. She threw in a handful of kernels and stirred the ashes about with some sprigs of penny-royal until the kernels burst into snowy flowers. These Gracián was crunching appreciatively between his teeth, while Mirra put her share away in a shoe-box.

"What are you doing that for?" he asked, but she would not give him any explanation.

It was the day before Gracián was to leave for Cordova on his way back to school and the little girl wanted to hide the box of pop-corn in his suitcase, so that when he opened it up he would think of her.

Tránsito was a great story-teller. She knew the language of the birds and she was telling them how the owls as they sit in the tree watching their holes keep asking their sisters, "Got any tobacco? Got tobacco?" and how the others answer as they fly up into the air, "Not a bit, not a bit!"

Gracián laughed at the way the old cook imitated the owls' cries as she spoke the words, but Mirra did not even smile. Silently she kept on picking out the biggest kernels as they came from the pot.

Amoroso, who was watching her, said:

"To-morrow we must make cracknel from the fat of the red heifer."

Mirra was very fond of cracknel — those little pieces of tallow fried brown in the melted suet and eaten hot — but this time she shrugged her shoulders disdainfully at the announcement.

"To-morrow!" she thought to herself — "What do

I care what they do to-morrow? Gracián won't be here!"

Flavia came across the courtyard, followed by some doves which fluttered about her. She entered the kitchen, looked at Gracián and Mirra, and left again without saying a word.

A flame of devotion blazed up for a moment in Amoroso's eyes.

Gracián knew that Flavia wanted to speak to him but had not done so because of Mirra.

When he left the kitchen a little later without the girl, who was still intent on filling her box, Flavia called him into her room and shut the door, looking about her cautiously.

"So you are going away, Gracián?"

"Yes, *señora.*"

"Are you sorry to go?"

"Oh, if I could choose, I should never go! I'd stay right here!"

Flavia said nothing. She did not seem to be pleased with his answer.

"Tell me, Gracián," she continued after a pause, "did you ever go over to the Hill again on any of your walks?"

She rarely spoke the name of the owner of the Hill.

"We crossed over the boundary two or three times on our way to the plantings."

"Did you ever see anyone?"

Gracián thought for a moment.

"We met *him* once."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, *señora,* all alone."

"Didn't you ever see anyone else?"

"Why, yes, *señora,* . . ." began the boy hesitatingly.

"Someone from over there . . . from the Hill?" asked Flavia anxiously, drawing the boy closer to her as if she wanted to read his answer in his eyes before his lips could frame it.

"One day when I was alone I met *her.*"

"Whom do you mean?" Flavia asked with a strange eagerness, for she must have known that the children always used the pronouns "he" and "she" when referring to Camargo and his daughter.

"Why, Victoria, his daughter," Gracián answered. Then he went on to tell how one morning he had met a fair-haired little girl riding on a donkey. Like himself, she was all alone wandering about the hills near the boundary of Black Valley.

"Did you speak to her? What did she say to you?"

Gracián explained that he had not known who she was, so he had asked her if she were lost. She had smiled and he had blushed when he realized that she knew her way about the hills much better than he. He had told her who he was and as soon as she had heard his name Gracián had noticed in the child's eyes — strange, beautiful eyes, like those of Flavia — a flash of indignation, such as he had sometimes seen blazing in Mirra's.

"You are from Black Valley, are you?" she had said. "Don't you know that it is my father's property?"

This question, which had once so exasperated Mirra, sprang from a conviction which was as deeply rooted in the Camargo family as their religious faith.

"I don't know anything about it," answered Gracián, who had not wanted to become involved in the dispute.

Flavia listened to his story with intense interest. She wanted to know every word that the child had said and she wanted him to describe every gesture that she had made.

And Gracián was obediently telling her everything he could remember, when he chanced to look up at her and exclaimed:

"Her eyes are just like yours! They are your very eyes!"

Flavia grew as pale as death.

"Are you sure?" she asked, her voice breaking with emotion. "You say her eyes are like mine! Do you know . . . I have lived here for years and I don't know her. I have never seen her . . . but other people have told me the same thing."

She turned quickly toward the window which opened out on the alfalfa field and gazed off toward the Hill as if she hoped to see the child of whom they were speaking. Then she turned around again to Gracián, who stood watching her without understanding her emotion.

"Tell me what she looks like. Her eyes are like mine! Is she pretty?"

"Yes, *señora.* She is fair and her eyes are green like yours."

"Oh, Gracián, I . . . I don't even know her!"

With a depth of feeling incomprehensible to him, she took the boy in her arms and covered him with passionate kisses, wetting his cheeks with her tears, which gushed forth as if some divine rod had touched the mysterious rock of her soul.

When Gracián came out of the room he found Mirra waiting for him. She was melancholy and out of sorts. They went off to play together, but neither of them spoke of Flavia.

A cold wind was blowing from the south. It blew without stopping all night long and the following morning it continued on its way, relentlessly tearing the smaller branches from the trees in the grove, combing out the fields of pampas grass, scattering far and wide the ripe seeds from all the weeds, and roaring in the chasm near the caves.

It was the first sudden, chilly breath of the approaching winter. In a single night it stripped the poplars of all their leaves and spread them over the pond like a carpet of old gold. The wind moaned through the fine bare branches.

When the sun came out and the wind died down one could see the top of Mt. Achalá covered with snow.

Mirra, who had awakened early, was then already down by the dam, sitting in a willow-tree, gazing absently off toward the horizon, her thoughts on that far away city which was claiming Gracián.

One hour more and he would have to leave to catch his train at Cosquín, and then a whole year — a long

sad winter, a long happy springtime — must pass before she would see him again.

She was waiting there to ask him to promise her that he would not open his suitcase until he arrived in Cordova, and that he would not do it then until after her father had left.

She had concealed the box of pop-corn among his clothes as stealthily as if she were doing wrong, and in the box on top of the kernels she had laid a little picture of herself, taken in Cosquín. It was not a good likeness, but it brought out fairly well some of her features — her smooth, clear forehead with the mischievous gleam of her eyes, and her saucy, uptilted little nose.

Gracián finally arrived, dressed for his trip and overflowing with that spontaneous joy which takes possession of children on such occasions. He stood beside her talking about the city and about his school.

In one of his classes this year they were going to study a thick book which he had always looked at with envy the year before. He was glad that now he would find out what it was about. He would bring the book with him on his next vacation so that she could see for herself how hard he had to work to pass his examinations.

He would bring his school uniform, too — a black suit with the emblem of the school embroidered in gold on the lapels, and a cap with a gold cord, like a marine officer's. He would put them on sometime so that she could see him in them.

To all this Mirra made no answer. She did not even

look at him, but kept throwing little stones into the water and seemed to be very intent on the circles which they formed in the crystalline surface of the pond.

"Gracián, Gracián! It is time to go!" someone called from the house.

He stood still for a moment, embarrassed. Had the time come so soon? How was he to say good-by to Mirra when she sat there so indifferent and so absorbed in what she was doing?

"Mirra! I am going!" he said, and his voice trembled.

Mirra jumped down, her eyes full of tears, and held out her arms to him. He threw his arms around her and she laid her head on his breast. Then she raised her tear-stained face and kissed him tenderly.

"I must go now," he said again. "Shall we walk back to the patio together?"

She shook her head. "No! No!" She did not want anyone to see her crying.

He took a few steps and then turned back again, and Mirra stood on tip-toe and kissed him a second time. He left her gazing at the pond in which at the return of another spring her friendly willow-tree would again bathe its mournful branches.

Señor de Viscarra already had his foot in the stirrup. Beside his sorrel horse stood the one which Gracián was to ride. Lazarus on his mule was carrying Don Jesús' bag and the boy's suitcase in which Mirra had hidden her presents.

They waited a moment for the little girl, for Gracián

said nothing of having seen her. Then Señor de Viscarra, who was afraid of missing the train, said impatiently:

"We must be off!"

And they departed. Gracián carried with him the tingling impress of Mirra's kisses, the memory of a strange look in Flavia's eyes, and a vague feeling of foreboding that things would never be the same again.

Chapter VI

I WILL COME TO-NIGHT!

THERE was an old legend connected with Black Valley, which the simple country people, who believed in ghosts, had reason to call to mind that winter. For strange things happened. Some of the peons of the estancia declared that they had seen the spirit of the viceroy's daughter wandering about the carob-grove late at night.

According to the legend, which dated from colonial times, the daughter of a viceroy had once run away with one of her father's slaves. They fled to the mountains — to Black Valley, tradition said.

Some time afterward her father's soldiers found them, slew the slave, and let the lady escape in order to avoid the necessity of killing her, too.

She drowned herself in the deep waters of the chasm, from which on moonlight nights she would rise to lure men to their destruction and thus avenge the death of her lover.

They said, too, that sometimes her ghost wandered about Black Valley seeking the place where the bones of the slave were buried and that little flames would

appear above this spot and vanish again as soon as anyone approached it.

The people of the estancia recalled this story because Lazarus declared that on one moonlight night he had seen the ghost of the viceroy's daughter walking about among the trees in the direction of Camargo's Hill.

And another night the old cook, awakened by the barking of the dogs, saw the same thing from the window of her room. But if the mysterious figure was the ghost of the viceroy's daughter, it had changed its appearance, for it no longer wore white, as tradition had it, but black, and it was tall and agile.

When these tales were told to Señor de Viscarra he frowned and was displeased. He had a firm trust in God and did not believe that He would ever permit the souls of the dead to wander about the mountains to frighten the living.

One morning the second watchdog, which used to roam about loose at night, had disappeared. Now only the shepherd dogs that drove the cows down from the mountains were left. They did not make good watchdogs, for they were in the habit of falling asleep in front of the hearth, tired out after their day's run.

Don Jesús was away from home on business that night and Flavia and Mirra were eating their supper in silence. In the lamplight the expression on their faces looked cold — almost hostile. Suddenly from out on the mountain they heard Pichana's scream.

Mirra looked at Flavia, who trembled visibly.

"Was that Pichana?" the child asked.

"How should I know? Didn't Lazarus say once that it wasn't Pichana?"

"But who can it be if it isn't she?"

Flavia shrugged her shoulders and did not answer. She felt Mirra's eyes resting upon her. She did not want to meet those searching eyes, so she rose and went to her room.

The little girl went out into the warm kitchen, where the glowing embers upon the hearth were beginning to slumber under a coverlet of white ashes.

She liked to wait there by the fire, listening to the peons' stories and the superstitious opinions of the old cook, until it was time for her to go to bed. She preferred its coziness to the cold deserted dining room or to Flavia's bedchamber.

Before she realized it she had fallen asleep. When the barking of the dogs awakened her she found herself in bed, with the moonlight streaming in through the open window.

The barking stopped, but she was disturbed by all the things that had been happening, and was about to sit up in bed, when she saw Flavia come in wrapped in a black cloak which made her look like a shadow.

She shut her eyes and did not move when she felt her aunt bend over her to see if she were asleep.

"Mirra!" she heard her say softly, "Mirra!"

She did not answer. Her heart thumped loudly in her breast with a foreboding of strange things to come.

A long time passed in which not the slightest sound

was heard and she had begun to lose consciousness again, when she was startled by a slight creaking of the window which opened out onto the fields. She opened her eyes, but could see nothing. The shutter through which the moon had been shining was closed now and thick darkness filled the room.

She was frightened and called to Flavia in a low voice. No one answered.

"Flavia, Flavia!" the little girl repeated. She felt conscious of someone's presence and this black silence oppressed her. She sat up in bed, her teeth chattering with cold and fear, her eyes wide open, yet seeing nothing. She did not dare to move. Her voice became more and more plaintive.

"Flavia! Flavia!"

A sob from the opposite corner of the room finally reached her ears and gave her courage to get out of bed and to speak louder.

"Flavia! What's the matter?"

Little by little she felt her way in the darkness over to the part of the room where Flavia slept. Here she found her on the floor, her head resting against the bed, crying. Her weeping sounded as sweet and as sad as water falling from some hollow rock, hidden away from the sight of men.

The child was touched. She knelt down beside her aunt and put her arms around her.

"Why are you crying, Flavia?" she asked.

Flavia turned toward her.

"Why doesn't anybody here love me?" she asked.

"Don't they know how much I need to be loved when I do right and how much I need to be pardoned when I do wrong?"

Mirra pityingly kissed her cheeks.

"But what has happened, Flavia? What makes you say such things?"

"Oh, Mirra, why do you . . . ?"

She did not finish her sentence, but stood up quickly, dropped the heavy dark cloak which she was wearing, and threw herself on the bed, as mute and unapproachable as ever.

Mirra drew closer to her, attracted by this mysterious grief, which she could not comprehend, and spoke to her again.

But Flavia did not answer. Her head was turned toward the wall and she might have been asleep — or dead — so cold were her shoulders and her arms which she had crossed over her breast.

Her silence frightened Mirra. The child's imagination could find no explanation for these strange happenings. She felt her way back to her own little white bed, snuggled down in it, and covered her head with the bedclothes.

What did all this mean? Who could tell her? Was she dreaming it all — or was Flavia crazy?

The dawn filtering through the cracks of the door to the east found her asleep. When she opened her eyes and looked over toward the other bed, Flavia was no longer there. Mirra began to believe that it had all been a dream, but when she met her aunt later in the full light

of day and saw the dark circles under her eyes and an expression of suspicion and reproach in them, she realized that she could not have dreamt it and that she must wait for time to solve the mystery for her.

As Amoroso was riding in the woods that day, looking for some stray cattle, his mule suddenly snorted and pricked up her ears, as she shyed at a clump of bushes.

With a good lash from his strap Amoroso forced her to keep in the path and move forward. Behind the bushes he discovered Camargo, the owner of the Hill, walking on foot on Señor de Viscarra's property.

The peon rode up to him and raised his hand to his kerchief in greeting.

Neither his rustic habits nor the wild, dissipated life which he led had entirely obliterated from Camargo's appearance the signs of good blood. His blue eyes and fair hair still gave evidence of his noble birth.

His manner was brusque and his speech laconic, except when he had been drinking.

When he saw Amoroso he spoke to him roughly and as if he had been waiting for him:

"She didn't come last night either. What does she mean by this?"

The peon hung his head and did not answer. The mule, distrusting this man who had been hiding among the thorns, kept snorting and kicking.

"For the last time . . . do you hear? Tell her she is to come to-night."

"Very well, *señor*," murmured the peasant.

Don Pablo took a piece of paper from his pocket, folded it several times and gave it to him.

"This is the last time," he said, and striding off into the thickest part of the woods, he was soon out of Amoroso's sight. Amoroso turned his beast toward the house, as if the errand which had taken him out across the fields had now been accomplished.

Meanwhile the master of the Hill strode along with an ease which is seldom found among the people of that part of the country, who go everywhere on horseback and almost never walk.

Soon he came to a brushwood fence which was interrupted in one place by a large rock. He climbed up on the rock and jumped down on the other side. As he touched the ground he gave a deep sigh of satisfaction and said to himself:

"Now I'm on my own land again!"

His horse was waiting for him there, tethered to a tree. He untied it, mounted, and started off toward his estancia up on the plateau.

He rode rapidly along a stony path which followed the line of the fences of Black Valley.

That day he seemed even gruffer and more discontented than usual.

It was years now, years since he had spoken with Flavia. They had not met since the time, long ago, when he had secretly been her lover. Yet of late he had caught glimpses of her in the distance, and his blood had pounded in rage as he remembered how the

will of his enemy had taken her away from him. She seemed changelessly beautiful, and the fire of his old passion glowed deep within him, burning like a hidden flame seeking an outlet.

So with great patience he had succeeded in winning the good will of Amoroso, whom he had known since childhood, and he had learned to imitate Pichana's cry as a signal to Flavia that he was near, sending her word through Amoroso that when she heard the call she should know that he would be waiting for her in the stony field until dawn.

For three years now he had waited, sure that sometime she would return to him. He could not believe that time had changed her heart or made her forget what she had lived.

All this time, day by day, the bad feeling between the Camargos and Viscarras had become more and more intense; yet though he realized that every hostile act alienated him further from Flavia, he never rejected an opportunity to insult or annoy her brother.

He was confident she must finally submit to his will. There was one final argument which he guarded. . .

Flavia, on her part, through all the years when she had not seen him, had felt a relationship with him like a shadow over her whole life. There had been that moment of mad impulse, repented of in bitterness, when her brother had flatly refused to recognize her engagement to Camargo.

She had thought, at eighteen, that she was able to judge life and men; she had underestimated the strength

of Señor de Viscarra's will. Cherishing like a poisonous plant a resentful desire to exasperate him, she had refused to break off her affair with his enemy. She had not realized the danger of her situation until she found herself on the brink of the abyss into which she had fallen. Then she had hidden herself from everyone like a wounded animal awaiting death.

But she had a sensitive conscience, and although passion had almost made her deaf to its voice, the pain of reality had brought her back again to her better self. She weighed her fault and acknowledged its full measure, and, eager to atone for it, broke with her lover suddenly. She would not even trust herself to see him, lest a new wave of passion should make her regret her decision.

But she did not forget him — she could not forget him.

She remembered always the wretched little village up in the mountains where no one knew her, where she had given birth in secret to a baby girl. She remembered how she had kept the child's very existence a hidden thing, finally entrusting Victoria to Camargo to avoid suspicion. She had hoped then to find an opportunity to confide in her brother, win his forgiveness and his permission to marry her lover. After a few years, when Señor de Viscarra found himself left alone by the death of his wife and sent for Flavia to come back to Black Valley, she had hurried to him, hoping to be near her little daughter, hoping to summon strength to go to her brother and confess how and

with whom she had disgraced his good name, to ask him for the only help now in his power to give, since the past was irrevocable.

But she never did. She delayed, and with every day the bad feeling between the owner of Black Valley and the owner of the Hill grew more and more bitter, and Flavia's reasons for keeping silence, stronger. So with time her suffering increased and she grew more and more afraid to face her brother's righteous anger or the silent reproach of his eyes. These would condemn her, even if his lips should pardon her.

Meanwhile she spent hours in hidden places of the Valley hoping to see her daughter. She watched with the eagerness of a prisoner awaiting his hour of release. She used all her ingenuity devising ways of meeting this child—her baby, taken away in infancy and brought up in the care of a man who knew nothing of a mother's suffering, and was poorly fitted to train a growing girl. But fate had always shattered Flavia's plans. After living three years so close to Victoria she had never once seen her.

Once Mirra had told her that she often met the little girl and that they played together, and Flavia had believed that she would soon enjoy that happiness which is the merest trifle in the lives of other mothers. But the friendship between the two children was poisoned by the same bad feeling that had estranged their fathers, and it came to an abrupt end.

It had cost Flavia a great effort to restrain the angry fever which burned within her when Mirra told her

that she had struck her daughter. It was hard not to be able to defend her!

She spent hour after hour watching the Hill from her bedroom window, the only place from which she could gaze without being watched in turn by others.

She saw nothing! Nothing!

She finally realized that by coming to the neighborhood in which her former lover was living, she had voluntarily placed herself near a temptation which, like a net, was entangling her.

Since she had no other support than her own moral strength, the blows which fate had inflicted upon her made her think that God must have forgotten her.

Had she not more than atoned for her wrongdoing? Then why could she not find peace?

One day her faithful peon, Amoroso, said to her:

"*Niña* Flavia, Don Pablo has spoken to me. He says that he has seen you."

Amoroso had often brought Flavia news of her daughter and she had asked him so many questions about her, and the poor peasant, who longed to be of use to her, had described the little girl with such fidelity, that she would have recognized her among a thousand children of the same age.

The interest which Flavia had shown in everything that went on at Camargo's Hill had made the peon think that it would please her to hear Don Pablo's words. They had been few and passionate.

"He says that he has seen you and that he wants to see you again."

Ah! That was like her own longing to see her little girl! She wanted to see her and she knew that once having seen her she would want to have her always in her sight.

That was love, triumphant over all the obstacles which time, absence, and human ingenuity could put in its way.

"Where did he see me?" she asked with a profound joy in the dark depths of her soul.

"On the way to the dam, he says."

She never went that way again. But it was easier to control her steps than to control her thoughts. She kept on thinking. And bitter feelings began to spring up in her heart like weeds in an abandoned field. She grew more silent, more reserved, and more suspicious of her brother's searching eyes.

Sometimes she convinced herself that she was suffering for the wrongdoing of others, that she must have more than atoned for her own mistake, that the whole thing would never have occurred if the two families had been friends — or at least had not hated each other on account of those wretched pieces of land.

And she had about resolved to break through the conventions and prejudices which bound her, when they learned at Black Valley that Pablo Camargo had sworn that he would kill Don Jesús de Viscarra.

Flavia, who knew Camargo, knew that this was no idle threat — and again her spirit failed her.

At about this time he began to persecute her again. He insisted upon seeing her, using all manner of per-

suasions and trying to win her over by offering to bring her daughter to her.

It was a temptation that was ravishing, fearful! Why did not God, who had given her so much suffering, give strength to her also?

She had never kept her rendezvous with him, even after she had promised faithfully to meet him. At the last moment she was always restrained by some divine precept in her heart, some sacred principle which she had learned as a child and could not forget. But when he spoke to her of her daughter her will power vanished like mist before the wind and she sent him word that she would not fail him.

That was the night that Mirra had discovered her as she was about to go out. She had looked into the child's eyes and had been frightened, and once more had stayed away.

At nightfall the next day Amoroso brought her Camargo's final message and gave her the paper on which he had written the terrible threat that if she failed to come he would take Victoria away forever from her sight.

She read the note in Amoroso's presence and answered briefly:

"Tell him that I will come to-night."

Chapter VII

THE UNDYING PAST

AFTER sunset the house on Camargo's Hill lay dark and melancholy in the shadow of its great carob-trees with the green carpet of moss covering its paths, its deserted patio overrun with weeds, and its silence broken only by the fluttering wings of the doves which had abandoned the tumbledown dovecote and made nests in the eavestroughs and in every hollow of the stone walls.

Pablo Camargo had not built this dwelling, but he had grown used to its bareness and its quiet — and he lived in it with his daughter and a woman who had been her nurse and was now their cook, as his only companions. The two or three peons who worked on the estate had their cabins at a little distance from the house.

Camargo did not wish to have any other witnesses to his manner of living. When he was tired of solitude he would go away for a time to one of the neighboring towns, leaving without saying where he was going and returning just as suddenly, more exhausted in spirit and coarser in speech than when he left.

That afternoon at sunset he sat as usual alone in the

southern corridor into which the night was creeping. His eyes were fixed on the large, flat stones of the floor and his thoughts were on the message which Flavia was to send him.

His longing for her was fiercer than ever; his passion broke, exasperated and shattered, against the firmness of her will. Whence did this woman, who had once loved him, get strength to resist him? Had she forgotten him? That was impossible. Shortly after their affair had been broken off he had heard a rumor that she was about to marry someone else and he had almost gone mad with rage and jealousy. Then he learned that she had refused her suitor and he had grown calm again with the assurance that she could belong to no one but him.

He did not see her again for years. The persistence with which he pursued her was equaled by the ingenuity with which she avoided him. And since he was still in the full strength of his impetuous youth, he became absorbed after a time in other affairs and finally grew indifferent to her and believed, to his great relief, that he had forgotten her.

At that time he already had his daughter in his power. Flavia had given her up to him and he kept her as a hostage.

He grew very fond of the child, whose origin no one knew except the faithful woman who had nursed her.

The years flowed by him like a turbulent river, without repose and without destination. He thought of

Flavia only when some incident connected with the owner of Black Valley stirred up in him the old enmity and the desire of wounding Señor de Viscarra in the spot which would hurt him most — his honor.

He used to give place in his imagination to schemes for letting Don Jesús know his sister's story, but he never carried out any of his plans for revenge, for they always involved a confession of his own defeat and that smarted in his memory. It was the scar of the old wound which still pained him.

As time went on, the constant sight of Victoria about him directed his thoughts again toward Flavia and he began to long for her as for a light in the darkness of his life.

In his house, through whose large bare rooms his solitary footsteps reëchoed, he felt the lack of a woman's touch. Why should not Flavia be there with him and with their daughter?

It never occurred to him to become reconciled with Señor de Viscarra, although it was quite possible that that gentleman who had been impassive to his insults might be willing to receive his friendly advances. He had hated him too long! And to come to him in friendship now would be to confess himself beaten.

Anything but that! He felt himself trapped. And now when after years he saw Flavia once more, he took up his suit with her again, as if he were in love with her for the first time.

But he had neither his former faith, nor his former patience, and at every repulse his passions, good and

bad, rose in a single torrent, until he felt himself on the verge of madness or of crime.

That afternoon, as he sat in the south corridor watching the light fade away on the hills and the shadows steal into the house, Victoria came in and spoke to him.

"A man wants to see you, papa."

Camargo rose and began to walk up and down in the room. The little girl stood waiting for his answer. She was accustomed to her father's fits of silence.

"Who is it?" he asked finally, although he knew that it could be no one but Flavia's mesenger.

"Someone from Black Valley. He wouldn't come in. He is waiting down the hill. He seems to have come on foot."

It was his answer — no doubt about it!

But could he put any confidence in it? How many times this fellow had met him and told him that she would come! And she had never kept her word!

Now he was playing a new card. His last one! He did not know what might happen if he should lose again.

Victoria followed him as he strode off across the patio. He turned around suddenly and looked at her.

"Would you like to see your mother?" he asked.

The child made no answer. It was the first time that he had ever spoken of her mother to her and she did not understand what he could mean.

He shrugged his shoulders and walked off down the hill, where he found Amoroso waiting.

The rain had formed a path down the slope between

thick growths of underbrush. Some stones gleamed white at the bottom.

Amoroso, who did not like to be seen when he was going on an errand for Flavia, avoided the highroad and waited here behind the bushes until the little girl could bring word of his presence to the owner of the Hill.

As Camargo approached the place, the peon rose like an apparition from beneath the earth.

"My mistress says that she will come to-night."

"Did you tell her what I told you to say?"

"Yes, *señor*."

"That I was asking her for the last time?"

"Yes, *señor*."

For a few moments they were both silent. Then Amoroso asked:

"Is there any other message for my mistress?"

Camargo shook his head.

"No."

He heard a voice within him telling him that at last Flavia was in his power. And strange to say this assurance did not cause him the rapture that he had anticipated. Once more he felt how parched and desolate was that soul of his, which could pursue an object with passion, but became cold and disillusioned the moment it was attained.

When he returned to the house Victoria was still pondering the words he had spoken to her as he left.

It was already dark. In the deserted dining room

with its few worn pieces of furniture, an old copper lamp was burning, which the little girl had just lighted.

Camargo entered and shut the door behind him, for it had grown quite cold.

"There is going to be a frost to-night," he said to Victoria.

The little girl came and sat down at the table beside him.

"What did that man say to you?"

Camargo hesitated a moment before answering. Wasn't it better, after all, to tell her? Didn't he owe his daughter some explanation of their solitary life in that deserted house?

As he saw her looking up at him with the large, deep eyes which she had inherited from Flavia shining with interest, he felt a wave of tenderness sweep over him.

"Would you like to see your mother?"

Victoria turned her head away, confused and embarrassed at the simple question. It was hard for her to tell her father that she thought this must all be a pleasant dream from which she would presently awaken — that she did not understand what his question meant.

"Victoria!" her father said again, passing his hand over the blond curls which fell down over her shoulders. "Do you want to see her, Victoria?"

"Oh, yes, papa!" she cried, throwing her arms around his neck. "But isn't she dead? Then it isn't true that she died?"

Camargo shook his head and submitted to his daugh-

ter's kisses. Like himself, Victoria was sometimes indifferent and sullen and then again vehement and passionate.

"No, she isn't dead. Who told you that she was dead?"

"Why, you did, papa. You told me so, yourself, didn't you?"

"Perhaps I did. Well, it isn't true. Would you like to see her?"

"Oh, can I go where she is? Or will she come here?"

Her eyes were full of tears. How much they looked like Flavia's! He bent over his child and kissed her eyes.

"Papa," she whispered in his ear, keeping her tear-stained face turned away from him, "can my mother really come here?"

He felt the contagion of her deep, sincere emotion and answered:

"Yes, yes, she can come."

"Then why doesn't she come? Will you send for her? Will she come then?"

"She can come, . . ." he repeated, "she can come, if she wants to."

"And doesn't she want to, papa? Doesn't she want to come? Where is she? Are you going to tell her to come?"

"If she wants to."

There was so much doubt in her father's manner and in his tone as he said this that Victoria's face fell.

The housekeeper came in to set the table and her

presence dispelled the enchantment which had been binding them together.

Camargo rose abruptly and went out. He was disgusted — he did not know why — disgusted with life, with himself — perhaps disgusted because he had been weak enough to show tenderness.

Victoria remained where she was, her arms on the table and her fair head hidden in them to conceal her tears.

The housekeeper thought that she was asleep. And when her father returned later she really had dozed off.

He did not waken her, for he wanted now to avoid her questions. He went into the kitchen and hurriedly ate a piece of meat broiled over the hot coals. Then he wrapped himself in his voluminous military cape and went out.

A young peon brought him his horse, which had been turned out in a near-by pasture to spend the cold, raw night under the open sky.

He brought out the saddle and bridle himself and began to buckle them on slowly to give himself time.

He often started out at an untimely hour without explaining where he was going, but this time his looks and his manner betrayed the fact that he was on an unusual errand.

He felt convinced that this time he would not be disappointed in his hopes.

"Where can the master be going that he doesn't even want the dogs to follow him?" the housekeeper asked herself as she went back into the dining room to look

for the little girl in order to give her something to eat before putting her to bed.

Camargo did not take the road to Black Valley. He started out in the opposite direction. He was some hours ahead of time, for the meeting was not to take place until midnight, and he could not bear to wait so long in one place.

So he started off at a trot in the direction of the sierras, along a very solitary road, where there was not a single house, for the peasants built their dwellings in the shelter of the ravines where they were protected from the cold winds.

The moon had not yet risen. Clusters of stars were scattering their cold, sparkling light over the earth. The mountain that shut off the horizon was a single dark point. One star which was peeping over the top of a little hill looked like a light in a hut.

There was no wind, but waves of warm, damp air came up from the ravine.

Would Flavia come? Would she really come or would she fail once more to keep her word?

As the hour approached he began to feel a gnawing doubt. Had she disassociated herself so completely from him that it was necessary to speak to her of her daughter in order to persuade her to come?

But would she really come? If she came, he would be satisfied. He wanted to see her, whether she came for his sake or for that of the child. He wanted to speak to her, for he felt sure that he could find again the path to her heart.

He was riding now at a gallop. The hill sounded hollow beneath his horse's hoofs. The moon rose and the shadows of thickets flung themselves out over the gleaming, white earth.

"It is time to turn back," said Camargo to himself, but moved by that curious impulse which always made him thwart his own most cherished desires, he kept on riding up the same road in the opposite direction from that of the appointed meeting place. Then suddenly he gave in, turned around, and whipped up his horse as if he were trying to recover the time he had lost.

The hill sloped gently down toward Black Valley. In the distance he could see in the moonlight the dark wooded spot which formed Señor de Viscarra's property.

As he neared this place he reined in his horse and looked about nervously for a place in which to tie it. Then he dismounted and jumped the fence.

"What if she does not come?" he asked himself again. Oh! If she only would, if she only would!

He felt bound to her — bound as if he were a slave.

Among the trees through which a little light was filtering, he saw Flavia's shadow. She had been waiting for him in a state of almost unbearable excitement and now when she saw him come alone, without her child, she sat down on the ground and burst into sobs. She felt that she had fallen into a trap, but that she had no strength to protest against such injustice. It must be that fate was throwing her again into his path.

He began to speak to her, but for a time she heard

nothing, and when she finally raised her eyes and looked at him, her heart was beating with the same old complaint: Why did not God, who had sent her suffering, send her also strength?

"What is the matter, Flavia? Why are you crying?"

"Where is my child?" asked the unhappy woman. "I came to see her!"

"I know it," said Camargo sadly.

"I came because you promised that you would bring her."

"I know. That is why I promised it," he answered harshly.

"Then why did you deceive me? Why didn't you bring her?"

"Why have you deceived me so many times?"

"When?" asked Flavia looking at him innocently.

"Can you tell me how many times I have come here to wait for you and have spent the whole night here because I trusted your word?"

"Oh!" cried Flavia, hiding her face.

"For ten years I have been waiting to see you and now that I find you I discover that you are not thinking of me at all."

"Oh! For ten years I have been waiting to see *her*, Pablo . . ."

As she spoke his name her voice broke in a sob.

"Ten years! She is ten years old and I, her mother, do not even know her!"

"Do you love her so much without knowing her?" he asked bitterly. "I can't believe it! I have been

living in the hope that some day I would see you and that you would come back to me."

"Oh! No, no!" she protested.

"Yes! My life, too, has been gloomy and full of evil passions. This one hope has been my only ray of light. I did not want to deceive you, but I did not want to bring your daughter here until I knew what she is going to think of me, and what she is going to think of you, Flavia . . ."

"Why, what will she think?" she asked gently. "She will think that I am her mother. Does she know that I am still alive?"

"I told her so to-day."

"She knows that I am alive! Oh, Pablo! What did she say? Does she want to see me? Did she ask you anything about me? What I looked like? If I were far away?"

"Yes, she asked me all that. She asked me why you did not live with us, if you were still alive, why you abandoned her . . . and me."

The poor mother, on hearing these bitter words, felt as if her child's eyes were resting reproachfully upon her.

"But what could I do?" she asked helplessly.

"She wanted to know whether you would come to us or whether she should go to you," continued Camargo.

"Oh! I only want to see her. That is all!"

"And since I did not know what to tell her, I did not bring her with me. I left her crying . . ."

"Oh, Pablo! How could she help it? My little daughter!"

"And I, Flavia! What of me?"

"My daughter! And I do not even know her! Pablo, in my life, dark and gloomy as this valley in which we live, there is only one ray of light — the hope of seeing her some day. I don't know how or when it will be, but that hope is my life!"

Camargo stood by silent and grim, his blood beating in his temples like hammerstrokes. His emotions began to flow together in one single torrent of love, jealousy, hatred, and despair at having her near him, yet feeling her so far away.

For a moment it seemed to him as if a still darker night were falling on the valley — a night so dark that neither he nor Flavia nor anyone could see anything — a night in which deeds of violence and crime could be committed and never be discovered.

Flavia was quietly weeping, and as she raised her eyes to his and he saw how much she looked like her daughter, a feeling of tenderness came over him.

"Flavia — then all my past, all our past, does not exist for you?"

She shook her head.

"I don't believe it, Flavia! Even though you swore it to me, I could never believe that you could forget those things so completely."

"Oh, Pablo, Pablo!" cried the unhappy mother, shaken with convulsive sobs.

"But I will bring her, if you will come again, Flavia."

She said she would and with a rush of gratitude he seized her hands and kissed them. They were cold as death. He came closer to her and drew her trembling to him, wrapping his cape about her. He felt her head fall on his breast and saw her eyes close. Then the two were swept along together in the whirlwind which beat over them. She could not have said whether it was the mother's heart or the sweetheart's which yielded to his caresses.

Chapter VIII

A DISTANT HOPE

THE course of Flavia's life now began to run through dark channels. She was on her guard against Mirra, and tried to avoid her clear, penetrating eyes. She was on her guard against her brother and dreaded to imagine what might happen if he should ever discover her secret. She was on her guard against Lazarus, who was constantly in her presence and seemed to watch her more closely than anyone else in the house.

And in the intoxication of this second flowering of passion in her soul, the unhappy woman finally came to believe that she must be on her guard against her own daughter. Camargo had persuaded her that it would be unfitting for him to bring the child to their meetings and she had resigned herself to not seeing her — postponing once more that fulfillment of her dream to which she had looked forward through so many years.

She succeeded at times in quieting her conscience and in feeling light-hearted and happy, and any suspicions which her brother might have had were allayed when he saw her in this mood, so unreserved and so lovable.

Mirra no longer slept in the same room with her and

this made it easier for her to slip out to meet her lover.

Her heart no longer beat so violently when, wrapped in her dark shawl, she noiselessly opened her door and with steps as stealthy as a wolf's, crossed the dark corridor where night was reigning.

She had arranged with Amoroso to distract the dogs' attention and to quiet them if they scented the "ghost's" presence as it passed them on its way to the slope.

One morning Flavia asked him:

"Do you always sleep in the dormitory near Lazarus?"

"Yes, *niña.*"

"Did you follow me out to the slope last night?"

"No, *niña,* why should I?"

Flavia thought for a moment. She was sure that she had seen a form moving away from her among the trees.

"Weren't you out in the grove?"

"I have said that I was not, *niña.*"

She could read in the peon's faithful eyes the truth of his words.

"Then it must have been he . . . Lazarus!"

Amoroso accepted her words silently, but with a pang of jealousy that someone else should go where his presence was forbidden.

The next day Flavia gave him these orders:

"To-night I wish you would watch Lazarus. Let the dogs fret if they want to, but watch him."

That night Lazarus slept all night long in his hammock beside Amoroso. He did not even waken when the dogs barked.

And that night Flavia saw no shadowy form in the woods, so she felt certain that it had been he.

Why was he spying on her? For some time she had noticed a change in his manners. Could it be possible that he was in love with her? Would he dare to be? And if he were, why didn't he speak?

But what if he should speak? The blood burned in her cheeks at the thought! Had she indeed fallen so low that even Lazarus could hope to possess her?

Sometimes a glimmer of the truth reached her consciousness and she realized the depth of the dishonor in which she was living and realized, too, that the time would never come when she would carry out her good resolves. Whither would it lead, this winding, hidden course through which her life was passing? What could produce a change in the relations between her brother and Camargo?

Or, after all, now that she had found that her love was stronger than her will, now that she had yielded to her fate, why did she not leave her brother's house and go to her lover? She was free. Why did he not make her his wife?

Flavia knew that this could not be. Some insurmountable obstacle — she did not know what — stood in the way.

What was it? Didn't he love her? The sad, deep eyes which she discovered at times looking at her in rapture told her that he did. His strong arms that held her tenderly so that neither thorns nor stones should hurt her told her that he did. His heart beating so

wildly against her breast said the same thing. He loved her with all the affection of which his variable, passionate nature was capable.

Why, then, didn't he marry her?

Sometimes Flavia suspected that he was already married and that his wife was still alive. But if so, why did no one know of it?

Whenever such thoughts came to her she resolutely put them out of her mind and avoided any allusion which might shed light on his secret.

At other times she felt sure that it was simply a matter of Camargo's pride, that he had resolved never to humiliate himself by speaking to Señor de Viscarra, and that he was only waiting for her to guess his weakness and speak for him.

At such times she hoped that she might again regain her self-respect and it seemed an easy thing to go to her brother and confess to him her bitter secret of love and sin.

But as soon as she saw Señor de Viscarra's stern face, her courage died away like a flame that is kindled at night and extinguished at dawn, for Don Jesús, though merciful in his judgment of humble souls, was relentless with people of his own class, whose duty it was, he believed, to set the others a good example.

"I will tell him some other day," she thought, "some other day, when I can speak before he speaks first to me."

And so the days passed by and she did nothing.

During this time the petty acts of hostility with

which the people from the Hill were accustomed to annoy Señor de Viscarra had ceased, but whenever Lazarus went to town he came back with stories of Camargo's boasting words or of other people's remarks, and these tended to keep alive the old enmity.

Flavia trembled every time the overseer entered the dining room to get his orders for the next day's work.

If he had passed through Cosquín that day he always had something to relate. Don Jesús listened to his recountals with disgust, but with the determination to defend his rights. Flavia listened with fear that they might sometime contain some allusion to her.

Could everything that Lazarus told be true? Did he not perhaps invent some of his stories?

In vain Flavia asked Camargo about the truth of these tales. These were men's affairs and did not concern her, he would answer, for he really did not remember what he said in the course of his noisy orgies in town.

It was a melancholy winter, unusually cold and dry. The fields were parched and even the mountain streams dried up.

The cattle came down to the river seeking water and died by the hundreds without sufficient strength to reach the hills where the *churqui* bushes and the dry broom-weed were the only remaining vegetation.

Every day Don Jesús rode over his pasture land, giving orders for the dead animals to be skinned, so that his losses might be somewhat lessened.

If he was alone, he would dismount from his horse,

take the knife which hung from his belt, and strip off the animal's hide with a skill which none of his peons could surpass. The carcass he left as a banquet for the vultures which could be seen hovering over the valley in sinister flocks. The sheds of the estancia were piled high with hides obtained in this way.

They were not always brought in by the peons belonging to the ranch. Sometimes it was a peasant from the surrounding country who found the dead animal, skinned it, and came to ask for the meat in return for his service.

Don Jesús watched this sad course of events resignedly.

Others were losing more than he. On Camargo's Hill the animals rotted, hide and all, for the two or three peons who worked over there could not possibly look after all those that died.

Moreover, in Black Valley the stock could drink from the level banks of the stream, without wandering far across the fields.

The little river was a narrow thread of water now, and in certain places the earth on its banks was a treacherous mire stretching out like a smooth, black plain. In it could be seen the delicate tracks of partridges and occasionally the imprint of the claws of a mountain lion stamped as if in token of the fact that here he had established his empire.

Some of the cattle became mired in the deep slime. They were unable to extricate themselves and died of hunger or were slaughtered by the wild beast, who

ripped them open with one stroke of his paw, devoured their lungs, and left the bloody flesh to the vultures.

When the mountain lion had grown fat from these feasts, he was no longer satisfied with the weak, exhausted animals who came down to the river, and he began to attack the herds in the corral near the house, for in spite of the scarcity of pasturage the goats kept fat and glossy by eating the *espinillos* and *pencas*.

One morning five or six of them were found with their bellies ripped open, and in one of the reserve paddocks where some of the stock was kept, a beautiful young filly, the flower of Don Jesús' stables, was slaughtered.

It must have been the lion.

"We will have to kill him," said Lazarus.

The next day before dawn he and Amoroso set out with two dogs to guide them, following the trail of the beast. It was not easy, for the lion had doubled on his tracks, had curved about, and in a thousand ways had known how to throw his pursuers off the trail.

The overseer had promised Flavia the night before:

"I am going to bring you a lion-skin, *niña*, to put at the foot of your bed."

Amoroso had overheard him and had felt once more the same jealous pang as when he learned from his mistress that Lazarus was spying on her.

They discovered the lion's tracks near the river, down by the caves. They dismounted, for the horses could not proceed further among the rocks, and followed on

foot after the dogs, who had picked up the scent. It was not long before they came upon him.

The lion was hedged in on all sides by smooth blocks of stone; his death was certain. But it was necessary to get close to him to get a good shot at his head — or better still — at his left shoulder.

Lazarus went ahead, his gun ready. But before he reached the place the lion appeared! His dreamy, golden eyes, with the black slit in them, flashed when he saw his enemy. He lashed his quivering flanks with his yellow tail and looked about him for a way of escape, but as he turned around, he received a shot that infuriated him.

"Poor shot!" shouted Amoroso, who was following behind, watching intently.

Lazarus' second shot was no better. The animal leaped aside out of the way. Then, finding himself entrapped, he made a lunge for his enemy. One of the dogs jumped in his way and made him miss his goal. The lion turned and laid him open with a single stroke of his paw.

"Shoot, Amoroso!" ordered Lazarus.

The peon fired, as the beast was bracing himself against the rock before making a second attack. His shot missed, and Lazarus turned angrily.

"You missed on purpose," he cried.

"Perhaps!" answered Amoroso calmly, lowering his gun.

The lion leaped upon Lazarus. The overseer had

drawn his dagger and shifted his empty shotgun to his left hand.

It was a critical moment. With all his strength Lazarus thrust the breach of his weapon into the animal's open jaws and then, with a skillful blow, slit open its throat.

The two rolled over together among the rocks.

Lazarus rose first, and wiped off the blood which was bathing his face and his chest.

"My hour has not yet come," he said.

Amoroso looked on silently, with an evil light in his eyes. He had one cartridge left in his gun and he aimed at the lion, which had risen to its feet at the bottom of the ravine, where it had rolled, and was shaking Lazarus' gun between its powerful teeth.

"Don't shoot!" Lazarus shouted. "Can't you see he's done for? You might better have used your cartridge before."

He watched with hostile eyes while Amoroso lowered his gun again. Then, dagger in hand, he walked over to the place where the lion was making its last feeble struggles.

After a moment it lay prostrate in a pool of blood, its breath coming in gasps through the slit in its throat.

Lazarus recovered his gun and cautiously straightened out the body of the beast, getting ready to skin it. When he saw that it had stopped quivering he began to cut it open, without any help from Amoroso.

The peon stood leaning quietly against a rock. He made no comments. What ideas lurked in that dark

brain of his? What feelings of love, of pain, of hatred, found birth and death in his neglected heart?

At noon they went back to the house. Without making any ado, as if he had performed quite an ordinary task, Lazarus threw his bloody trophy at Flavia's feet. She examined it curiously and with a certain degree of complacency.

Don Jesús looked at the overseer's shotgun and discovered on the stock the mark of the lion's terrible teeth.

"How was this done?"

"The lion did it."

"Then how did you kill it?"

"With a dagger."

The short answer sufficed to make Señor de Viscarra realize all the danger of the day's work. He held out his hand to the peasant. As he clasped it Lazarus' eyes flashed with pride and he looked for an instant at Flavia. Then he became again the patient, humble servant whom they all knew.

Don Jesús did not read in that glance the passionate desires of this man, who was quietly biding his time, like a lion waiting for his prey.

Only Amoroso, who was watching the scene from a little distance, trembled as if aware of some approaching danger. But in his benighted soul, sensations were confused.

In September and October, the first months of the Argentinian spring, there was plenty of rain, and in November the fields were covered with a deep, rich

green, which was broken here and there by the gray of the thickets.

In every corner of the mountains, where there was even the smallest farm, the cheerful sight of tall fields of corn and trailing gourd-vines greeted the eye, promising a happy summer to the frugal country people.

But before the corn tasseled, there came a hot wind from the north, bringing great clouds of locusts, which settled upon the trees in voracious swarms and covered the earth with a living carpet, thick and acrid of odor. In a single night they devoured every green leaf and blade in the countryside.

Then, on the following day, when the sun had warmed the air, they flew on to other regions.

Don Jesús succeeded in saving his vegetable garden and his alfalfa field by scattering through them a crowd of young men who went about blowing tin horns and making a noise to keep the locusts from settling or to frighten away any which might have already alighted.

But all the rest of the valley looked as if it were the middle of winter.

"They have eaten even the coca-bushes," said the overseer to Don Jesús as they rode out over the small farms to see the extent of the damage.

"What I most regret," he replied, "is that the winter's drought and this swarm of locusts are going to serve the mountain peasants for some years as a good excuse for continuing to be lazy."

Lazarus shrugged his shoulders. It was true, but

who could blame them, as long as for some reason or other the crops were always destroyed?

Don Jesús read his thoughts in his glance, which was full of a peasant's fatalism. He decided, as usual, to preach by example rather than by precept, and that very day he gave orders that the oxen should be yoked, the fields plowed, and corn sowed to replace that which had been destroyed.

That night at supper he said:

"Next Sunday Gracián's school will hold its closing exercises. He has passed with credit and I am going in to the city to see him. We shall come back Tuesday."

Mirra had been waiting for this announcement ever since the peach trees blossomed in the spring, but she felt moved as by an unexpected joy.

And Flavia began to weave again in her imagination a plan which she had conceived when she first saw Gracián the summer before.

If he was coming back to Black Valley every year, he would certainly get acquainted with her daughter, and if he did not become infected with the contagion of hatred which had poisoned the relationship between the two families, he might fall in love with her, and marry her, and so bring her back to her mother!

When Mirra went to bed that night, she looked out over the valley sleeping in the shadows and remembered that there would be a full moon when Gracián arrived.

And as the earth had been washed with refreshing rains, the old hills, which he had already learned to love, would be clothed with new flowers.

Chapter IX

LAZARUS' SECRET

"THE south wind is teasing the north wind," said the old cook, looking out of the window which opened upon the fields. All day long a hot wind had been blowing from the north, but at nightfall the sky was covered with a mantle of thick clouds, which the south wind had driven up over the gloomy Achalá mountains.

"May God and the Blessed Virgin grant that the south wind brings us rain," answered a dark, thin, little woman of uncertain age, who was sitting on an overturned pail near the fire, smoking corn husk cigars, while she watched a huge pot in which cubes of tallow from the last slaughtering were melting.

Now and then she took a skimmer and let it sink into the boiling fat. She stirred it about for a little and then lifted it out again, holding it above the pot until the melted tallow had drained off. Then she deftly turned the crisp, deliciously smelling cracknel on to a pewter platter.

They were expecting Don Jesús and Gracián to arrive that night, and Mirra wanted to celebrate their coming with a treat. So she had taken it upon herself

to have one of the women of the neighborhood come and try out the tallow.

Some big drops of rain began to fall. They sounded like pebbles on the tin roof of the shed.

"This rain is a blessing," said Tránsito, gazing out at the mountains to the south, which were wrapped in a veil of mist. "This will wash away the locust slime and give a start to the new corn which the master has just sown."

"Ah yes! If it wasn't for him, what would us poor folks do?"

Tránsito looked at her sharply. She did not approve of her master's generosity to these lazy, wasteful people who never earned anything for themselves and always wasted the little money that came their way.

"What are you looking at me for, *Seña* Tránsito? Ain't I telling the truth?"

"You surely are. I was just wondering myself what would become of you if the master didn't sow and reap. For since you never plant anything for yourselves . . ."

The rain came down in torrents. Great claps of thunder seemed to plunge from the tops of the mountains and roll down into the valley. Lazarus came into the kitchen to dry off. He was followed by another peon and two or three dogs, which shook themselves violently, spattering the cook with water.

"Well, did you ever see the like of that? You beasts! Get out of here!"

But the dogs disappeared under the stove where

Tránsito's little poodle Diamela was already curled up asleep.

Lazarus mumbled a greeting between his teeth, laid the saddle, which he had just taken from his horse's back, on the floor and sat down upon it. The other peon, a middle aged man, solemn and quiet, stood at the door watching the rain which was still coming down in sheets.

Mirra came in just then. She had thrown a folded blanket over her shoulders, her feet were bare, and her wet hair was clinging to her forehead.

"Lazarus," she said impulsively, "do you think papa will come to-night?"

The overseer looked at the sky and shook his head.

"I don't believe so, *niña.*"

"Do you think it will keep on raining as hard as this?"

"I think it is going to rain quite a lot," he asserted with the usual vagueness of a peasant.

"And will the river rise if it rains like this?"

"If it is raining as hard as this up in the mountains, *niña,* it is very likely to rise."

The people of that part of the country always called the Achalá range where the rivers which water the valley of Cosquín have their source, "the mountains."

He thought for a while and then added:

"But it hasn't risen yet. The high water from the mountains moves slowly. Perhaps it will come to-morrow."

"But to-night?" asked Mirra anxiously. "Will they be able to cross the river if they come to-night?"

"Probably, *niña,* if they are careful, but it won't be easy. It's been quite a hard rain, and when they reach the bank the river will probably be swollen — from the water that has fallen near by here."

"Wouldn't it be a good thing to warn them not to come?"

The overseer looked out at the storm, which showed no signs of abating, and answered:

"The master knows as much as we — or more."

"But if it hasn't been raining in Cosquín, the storm may overtake them on the way."

"Amoroso went to meet them and he probably told them that it looked like rain when he left."

With this vague comfort Mirra was obliged to be contented. She went over to the cracknel pot, picked out two or three of the brownest morsels and crunched them between her little teeth. But nothing seemed to give her any pleasure and at length she walked back across the courtyard, paying no heed to the rain and the wind.

"The little mistress is worried," said the woman who was watching the pot.

"And she may well be," remarked the cook. "The river Yuspe is not so pleasant to cross in weather like this, especially in these parts where the floods come on you all of a sudden."

"They say that Don Pablo, while his father was still alive, nearly drowned once as he was crossing the river. The crest of the flood overtook him and dashed him against the rocks. He lost his horse, but he escaped."

"What Don Pablo?" asked Tránsito, who had stopped in the middle of the kitchen and stood with her arms akimbo, waiting for the answer.

"Don Pablo Camargo!"

"Huh! It would have been better if he *had* drowned! It's a big loss to the fish in the pond!"

"*Jesús,* neighbor, that is not the wish of a Christian!"

"What of it? Is *he* a Christian, do you think, living the way he does?"

"What do you know, Tránsito, about the way he lives?"

"I know all about it. People always find out everything. Where there's a fire, there's always smoke."

"He lives all alone there with his child and the servant who takes care of her. Well — is there anything wrong in that?"

Tránsito was about to answer when her eyes met those of Lazarus. He was looking at her fixedly, as if he were afraid that the old woman might say something indiscreet, if she really suspected what he knew to be the truth.

"What do you know about him?" repeated the woman, who, though indebted to Camargo for some few favors, liked above all things to catch hold of a bit of gossip.

Lazarus himself wanted to find out how much Tránsito knew. So he said, half shutting his eyes so that his words would seem casual:

"You can't believe all that you hear. What have they been telling you, *seña* Tránsito?"

The old woman whirled around and fairly shot her words into his face.

"That you are jealous of him."

The overseer changed color. But feeling the woman's questioning looks upon him, he answered with as much calmness as he could simulate:

"Why do they bring me into it?"

"You ought to know better than me whether they've got any right to."

"What do you want me to say, old woman? You invented this talk and you must know how much is back of it."

As he spoke he stood up to go out. The storm was clearing and he had work to do outside. But the old cook placed herself in his way.

"Listen to me, my son," she said. "I never make up stories. You know that as well as anybody. I only pick up what other people say and they say around here that you are jealous of Don Pablo."

"And on whose account?" Lazarus ventured to ask, hoping that the old woman was on a false scent.

"You know well enough," Tránsito answered with a shrug. Then she added, chuckling maliciously:

"They say that you are both courting the viceroy's daughter."

Lazarus perceived the full meaning of her words and went out clenching his fists. He vented his rage on some dogs which had taken shelter from the rain under the eaves, driving them out with harsh blows. On hearing the yelps of the mistreated animals, the

woman who was making the cracknel smiled and said:

"You seem to have touched the young fellow in a tender spot."

But Tránsito made no reply and did not attempt to explain her previous words "It's none of her business," she thought.

Lazarus felt set upon and discovered. Although he had not succeeded in finding out exactly how much the old woman knew, he no longer had any doubt that his movements were known, in spite of all his efforts to conceal them.

It was true. For some time he had harbored in his heart a foolish emotion, which now dominated his entire being.

How was it possible for him to have fallen in love with Flavia de Viscarra, when he knew the great gulf which separated her aristocratic family from his own humble caste?

He did not understand it himself. A thousand incidents had led to it, each one logically and inevitably linked to the other.

At first he had felt only admiration for this beautiful woman who had come to Black Valley to spend her days among them. Then her habitual melancholy and her silence concerning her past life had interested him. Flavia, too, in her search for an ally who might bring her into contact with her daughter, had occasionally flattered him. Knowing nothing of her motives, Lazarus had easily misinterpreted this and it had kindled in him a confused hope.

He could not have said just what he hoped for. But he had an inexhaustible fund of patience and he was content to let time flow by, trusting that in some way fate would bring them together.

As he gradually realized the full extent of her unhappiness, his hope began to take more definite form.

Then Flavia, annoyed by his attentions, which she never dreamt of attributing to love, began to treat him with arrogance and disdain. But this did not drive him away. The current of his emotions was too strong to be easily checked.

On the contrary, every humiliation to which she subjected him, quickened in him the desire to persist and ultimately to claim his reward and his revenge.

He took care that no one should suspect his love for her, for that would have been an insult to Señor de Viscarra's pride and he would have paid dearly for it. Conscious as he was of his lowly origin, he was aware that his only hope of triumph lay in concealing his desires.

He knew how easy it would be for Don Jesús in his rage to find two or three biting words which would wound him to the bottom of his soul. He shrank from the very thought of exposing himself to an ugly and humiliating reflection on his race or his blood, which he could not change and for which he was not to blame.

It was for this reason that he concealed his hopes and his plans even from his own shadow. It was for this reason, too, that the knowledge of Flavia's love affair with Camargo caused him no pain. It did not

remove her further from him. It rather drew her nearer to him. It might, moreover, serve him as a weapon of defense some day if his master should abuse him.

What really hurt him was the fact that she treated him so disdainfully. What right had she to do so — when she had fallen so low?

At times his patience was sorely tried and he felt in his low-born flesh the scorching fires of jealousy. At such times he would follow her about and spy upon her, anxious to speak to her and tell her that he knew her story in order to make her suffer as he had suffered — but at the same time fearful that he might only meet further humiliation.

For, after all, what hope was there for him, however low she might descend?

Full of such thoughts, he left the kitchen to old Tránsito with her pots and her gossip, and went out into the shed. He was sitting there on some saddle blankets, his head bent forward, intent on scratching the ground with a piece of wood, when he saw Flavia come in looking for him.

She never spoke to him any more except to reprove him sharply and haughtily, and yet it gave him pleasure to see her coming towards him.

What did she want this time? He stood up, took off his hat, and waited for her to speak.

"Lazarus!"

Her voice was not as stern as usual and her customary coldness had disappeared. She was excited and

her tortured soul shone in her magnificent, sorrowful eyes.

"What is it, *niña* Flavia?" he asked, dropping his eyes after one quick glance at her.

"Do you know Victoria?"

The overseer reflected for a moment.

"Do you mean Don Pablo Camargo's daughter?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"I see her now and then."

Flavia's nervousness increased. What folly it had been for her to come to Lazarus and speak of this!

The desire to see her daughter had begun to torment her again. For some time Camargo had not come to the Valley. He had either grown tired of her or had become the prey of one of those fits of melancholy which made him shun all human intercourse and shut himself up in his house like a wild beast. At first his absence had caused Flavia bitter anguish. Then it had kindled again in her heart the purer love for her little daughter whom she did not know.

She could wait no longer. Whatever punishment people might impose upon her would be easier to bear than this endless longing to know how her child looked, how she spoke, and what sort of a life she lived. She was ready to do anything. Amoroso could not help her, so she had come to Lazarus, feeling sure that he would do whatever she might ask of him.

"You know her, then?"

"She is about as old as *niña* Mirra," answered the overseer, and as he ventured to look more closely at the

beautiful woman who stood beside him he was struck for the first time by a suggestion of the extraordinary resemblance between Flavia and the girl of whom she was speaking.

"Do you know who Victoria's mother was?" asked Flavia, as she fixed her eyes on the peasant's overcast countenance, resolved to find out how much he knew about her.

But Lazarus knew as little as the rest about that and answered naturally:

"No, *niña*, not many could answer that question."

"Why not?"

"Who around these parts knows anything about Don Pablo's life?"

He asked the question in all good faith, but it brought a flush to Flavia's cheeks.

"They say the little girl is pretty. I should like to see her," she added boldly in order to put him off the scent. "They say that her eyes are like mine."

Lazarus looked at her again ardently. Flavia smiled.

"Can you see me plainly?"

"Yes, *niña* Flavia . . ."

He wanted to say more, but his heart failed him.

"Do you remember Victoria's eyes? Do they really look like mine?"

"I don't remember, *niña*."

"Well, never mind. I should like to know her. Can you get her to come over to the fence some time?"

Lazarus did not understand this caprice, but he agreed to try. It was pleasure enough for him to be able to

do her a favor and to be rewarded with a friendly word. He had often seen Camargo's daughter riding over the hills. She was always alone, and although he had seldom spoken to her, she knew him and probably would not refuse to ride a short distance with him if he could invent some story to interest her.

"Is the girl to know that you want to speak to her?" he asked.

"No," said Flavia, "neither she nor anyone else. That is why I have come to you, Lazarus, and have not confided in Amoroso. Neither she nor anyone else is to know. It's just a whim of mine."

Lazarus was silent, wondering what motives she could have for such a request. Flavia, to hide her uneasiness, began to examine the shed. All kinds of work tools were kept there and in the corners some setting hens had made their nests.

"When do you want to see her?"

Flavia turned around. She felt suddenly tender. What would she not do for the person who would bring her daughter to her?

Lazarus trembled again with an inexplicable emotion which passed like a flame over his body. He repeated his question.

"They say that Camargo is away from home," she observed calmly.

"That's what they say. He has been gone for days and it seems . . ."

"It seems what?"

"It seems that nobody knows where he is."

Flavia shrugged her shoulders in unfeigned indifference to the news which he gave so hesitatingly.

"One of these days — before her father comes back, if possible — I should like to see her. I would ask Mirra to bring her, but they have quarreled. So say nothing about this to her or to my brother, or to anyone else. You are the only one to know, Lazarus. I will go out to the orchard every morning and every evening. When I see you go by I will come up and you can tell me then whether she is coming."

And she went out, leaving him astonished at the warmth of her words. "You are the only one to know, Lazarus!" His heart beat wildly. Was the time really coming for which he had vaguely longed?

After Flavia had gone he looked out and saw old Tránsito staring at him from the kitchen. There was no malice in her broad face and her wrinkles had deepened into a good-natured smile. Still it displeased him that someone else had been a witness to his tête-à-tête with Flavia.

But his soul was filled with unaccustomed sweetness.

The rain, which had been letting up a little, came down again with renewed fury. The whole sky looked black and the mountains were hidden from view.

"It looks as though I will have to spend the night here," said the woman who was making the cracknel.

Tránsito made no answer. She begrudged the favors done these country people, for, as she said, they were always stuffing themselves and never had enough.

"Don't you think so, neighbor?" the other insisted,

squatting down by the embers to light another cigar.

"Why not? Stay if you want to! They'll never miss you at home. You'll never find a better place nor one where you have to pay so little!"

The woman laughed softly.

"Is there a bed?" she asked then.

"There's Amoroso's out in the shed."

"But didn't they say he'd be back to-night?"

"What do you care? All the better! He's a sound sleeper and he'll be cold when he gets home."

At nightfall Mirra had them put a light in the corridor to guide her father, though it was hardly necessary. Don Jesús could find his way anywhere in the mountains with his eyes blindfolded.

At about ten o'clock in the midst of a downpour which had turned every path into a torrent, they arrived, thanking God that the river at the ford had not risen beyond the horses' depth.

It had been a dangerous undertaking and a lucky escape, for the current was so strong that if the horses had lost their footing both they and their riders would have been dashed against the rocks in the bed of the stream.

But now they were safe at home. Don Jesús unburdened himself of his heavy woolen poncho, while Gracián shook himself like a water-soaked dog. The boy's eyes sparkled with the excitement of the day's journey; Mirra's glowed with the soft, gentle light of happiness.

Chapter X

I AM YOUR MOTHER!

"O GOD — dear God!" cried Flavia in an anguish of unexpected sorrow. She had thought so much about her daughter, she had cherished for so long the hope of knowing her and of winning her love, that she had come to believe that some day her wish would be granted and that her child's affection would restore to her the power to do right, which she had lost.

And now Lazarus had come back from the Hill with a message from Victoria.

"I don't want to have anything to do with the people at Black Valley. Don't you know, Lazarus, that they have taken what really is papa's land?"

Lazarus had smiled to see how completely Camargo's daughter was infected with her father's prejudice.

She had stood by the side of the road as he talked to her, and he had watched her with mingled curiosity and pleasure, for he saw in her eyes, beautiful as those which robbed him of his sleep, the same inexorable flame that shone in Flavia's.

"How much they are alike!" he had thought to himself. Then he had tried to persuade her to accompany him.

"There is someone there who wants to see you, Miss Victoria."

"Who?" the child asked impulsively, looking up at him.

"Miss Flavia. She has never seen you and . . ."

He did not finish his sentence, for Victoria raised her clenched hands and shook her disheveled head as if each of her bright curls were on fire with fury.

"She! Flavia! Never, never! Tell her, Lazarus, that I do not want to see her. She is the cause of all our misfortunes! It was her fault that my mother went away and left us."

Lazarus was surprised and puzzled by this statement, and since he did not know how much truth there might be in it, he made no further effort to detain the child. He rode back to the secluded place in the orchard where Flavia was waiting for him, her heart heavy with an extraordinary emotion.

"Oh! He is alone!" she cried as she saw him coming. She made a great effort to conceal her disappointment and listened to his story with composure.

But as soon as she heard his footsteps die away and saw his face disappear among the trees, she burst into a fit of weeping.

"Lord, is there no help for me, then?"

She heard a dry branch snap near by her. Ashamed to have anyone discover her there in that condition, she raised her tear-stained face and saw Mirra running away with an apron full of flowers and Gracián standing over her, looking at her.

"Why is Mirra running away, Gracián?"

The boy came nearer. He dropped the bird's nest which he was carrying and threw himself into Flavia's arms.

"What makes you cry?" he asked, kissing her.

"I'm not crying."

"Yes, you are! I can feel it. See!" and he showed her his own face, wet with her tears.

"Does it make you sad to see me cry?"

"Oh yes! Tell me what the matter is. Are you sick?"

Flavia kissed the boy without replying. Then she stood up and dried her eyes.

"Don't you ever cry, Gracián?"

"I?" he asked in a tone of surprise, and then he remembered that he had cried at school whenever he thought of Mirra. But he did not want to confess this, so he said merely:

"No. Men don't cry!"

Flavia smiled and sat down again. She had caught a glimpse of Mirra's white dress between the trees. The little girl was waiting for Gracián.

When Gracián went to join her Flavia sat thinking of the friendship between these children and of its possible outcome. If they should grow to love each other, it would mean that she would have to give up her dream of Gracián's marrying Victoria, she reflected sadly.

Gracián reached the place where Mirra was waiting for him.

"What did Flavia say to you?" she asked with a great deal of interest and a little jealousy.

"Nothing," the boy answered, for he was a bit ashamed of his affection for the poor woman.

"What is she crying about, then?"

"She is sick . . ."

Mirra turned her head and walked away. She resented it that he should have secrets with Flavia which she did not share.

Flavia stayed out-of-doors, watching the daylight fade and the mountain fill with shadows.

Since Camargo's absence she had often walked out this way, caring little that she might thereby awaken the suspicions of the servants.

It seemed to her that the only thing in life that mattered was her dream of knowing Victoria. She began to hate everyone who placed any obstacle in the way of her leaving the house and going where she pleased. Señor de Viscarra was away now, too, and she had thought that the time was favorable to her plans. And now she was thwarted by the little girl's own sturdy will and her hatred of every inhabitant of Black Valley.

To-morrow or the next day — some day soon — Camargo would come back to the Hill and then she could no longer go about with the same freedom.

When night had settled down over the paths Flavia went back to the house. At the sound of her footsteps the frogs in the pond stopped their croaking. The reflections of the stars shimmered like golden coins that had fallen into the water.

The master of Black Valley had returned. It was eight o'clock and he was waiting for his sister in the dining room. She was somewhat embarrassed when she came in, and threw down an armful of ears of corn which she had hurriedly picked in a field near-by to serve as an excuse for her tardiness.

"We will roast them to-morrow," she murmured. "The children are so fond of them that way."

Mirra looked at her intently to see if there were any traces of her recent fit of crying.

Señor de Viscarra had just finished reading his mail.

"A decision has been rendered in the law-suit by the court of the first instance," he said.

Everybody knew to what law-suit he referred.

"I won it, of course," he added, "with the costs."

After a moment's silence he spoke again.

"God has helped me and I must give Him thanks. And since to-morrow is Sunday I will take the children and go to Cosquín to hear mass and receive the Sacrament. We live so far from town that the obligation to attend mass on Sundays and holy-days cannot be considered binding for us. But everyone should worship God at some sacrifice. We make greater efforts for worldly things which are worth less."

He continued to talk on this theme, little caring whether or not they were paying any attention to him, as he dwelt upon it apparently for the satisfaction which his own peaceful reflections brought him.

Flavia heard him say "I will take the children" and

was relieved that he did not expect her to accompany them.

For how could she go to church? Could she enter the house of God and receive the Sacrament with a penitent heart and a determination to turn from her sin?

She trembled to think what would have happened if her brother had arranged to include her in the party.

At daybreak the next morning Señor de Viscarra woke the children. The horses were ready. Mirra was to ride Golden, for her father trusted to his gentleness. Don Jesús himself mounted a beautiful bay mule.

The children were full of joy as they rode off at a trot side by side.

As Flavia stood watching them she grew sad again to see how fond they were of each other.

Though Lazarus seldom entered the corridor when she was in the house alone, he approached her now and said:

"They will hardly come back before nightfall. That is good, for now you can probably see Miss Victoria."

"What do you mean? Didn't she tell you that she wanted to have nothing to do with me?"

"I have thought of a way to bring her," answered the overseer quietly.

Flavia clasped her hands with an involuntary gesture of appeal. Lazarus raised his eyebrows, puzzled at such an attitude.

"Oh, have you? Can you really bring her to me? You see, Lazarus . . ."

Then she realized that she was compromising herself with her enthusiasm and pretended to laugh.

"How foolish I am! But you see, Lazarus, after what she said to you I am even more curious to know her."

He did not answer. He would have liked to keep on talking with her, but he did not know what to say. His voice failed him and he found no words.

Flavia saw Amoroso coming and withdrew to her room, adding:

"What a silly story it was that she told you! I never knew her mother. I wonder what she could have meant."

The overseer met Flavia's peon in the patio, but Amoroso did not look at him. He did not want him to see his eyes, red with lack of sleep or with weeping. Who could tell what was happening in the poor wretch's soul?

A little later Lazarus saddled his horse, whistled to the dogs, as if he were going on his regular round of inspection, and set off toward the Hill in search of Camargo's daughter. She used to wander about at this time of day as free as a mountain-sprite.

He descended the hill to the thick grove of *molle*-trees which served as a place of refuge for the intractable cattle. He traversed nearly all of Camargo's land, but he did not find her. At noon he returned to the house, out of sorts because he was not able to keep his promise.

He met Flavia who had been eagerly waiting for his return.

"I didn't see her this morning, *niña*," the overseer said, "but this afternoon I surely will."

Flavia was comforted by his words. She had feared when she first saw him that he had met with another refusal.

At siesta time Lazarus started out again and Flavia sent Amoroso off on an errand, from which he could not return before nightfall.

For a moment she remained alone in the arched corridor of the great house, whose silence was broken only by the cooing of the doves on the roof and the gentle whirring of their wings.

Tránsito and Pastora were asleep.

She could not wait any longer. With the same impatient fear which she had felt on the first few nights when she had stolen out to meet Camargo, she left the house. Would her child come? Or wouldn't she? Was someone watching her whom she did not suspect? Would they find out her story?

Driven on by her own anxiety she hurriedly crossed the patio, flooded now with bright sunlight.

When she had gone about a hundred steps among the willow trees, she stopped and looked back. She could see only the topmost tiles on the roofs of the buildings. From here she could proceed to the place where she was to wait for Lazarus, without fear of being seen.

She pressed her hand against her breast to quiet the

painful throbbing of her heart. Was she really to see her daughter this afternoon?

After peering first one way and then the other, she crossed the rustling cornfield, agleam like restless silver in the afternoon sun, and concealed herself in the peaceful shadows of the orchard.

From here one could see the Hill and a corner of the fields of Black Valley. Flavia gazed at the familiar landscape with unseeing eyes.

Her thoughts were confused. She hardly knew what she had come to seek or what she expected to find.

Memories of her old life swept over her like a tide at its flood. Why had no one stretched out a hand to help her when she was about to slip? Why had there been no voice to warn her of the Calvary to which she was condemning herself?

And why, after she had suffered the penalty of her sin, had she lacked the courage to confess it? Why had she tried to save her pride at the cost of losing her daughter?

If she had only kept her with her! She would have been her strength, her virtue, the light of her life! What was the world's opinion worth in comparison with the happiness of being with her?

She had seen her only once — just after she was born. She had not loved her then. On the contrary, it had seemed as if all her shame were centered and symbolized in the baby. She had almost hated the child; it had cost her no pain to send it away.

And now Victoria was twelve years old and Flavia

had never spoken with her, never given her a single kiss.

Lazarus had laid his plans well. He had met the little girl the day before as she was chasing after a bee to find out where it had its hive.

"Do you like honey, *niña* Victoria?" he had asked, and when she answered "Yes," he had promised to look for a swarm and show it to her if he found one.

If he met her now he would take her to a hollow tree which was standing near the stone wall.

Some wild bees had built a hive in it and it was nearly time to gather the honey.

Riding along deliberately, as he often did to save his horse's strength, he came upon the child playing on the *cometierra,* as they called a little gulch in whose yellow clay sides the cattle had licked innumerable round holes.

On the edge of the gulch grew some vines which fell down over it in clusters of little flowers. These were marvelously white and shaped like chalices, and in the bottom of each lay a cool drop of honey.

Victoria, ensconced upon the back of a gentle but wary donkey, was picking the flowers and sucking them, first making sure that no bee was hidden in the center. Then she strung them together to form a wreath which she hung around the neck of her patient donkey.

Lazarus rode over to the *cometierra* and whistled to attract the child's attention. With one spring she dismounted from her beast and went over to face the intruder.

"It seems, Lazarus," she said assuming a severe tone,

"that you don't know the boundaries of your land."

"What makes you think so, *niña?*"

"Because you trespass on other people's property without asking permission."

"I was looking for a ewe that has strayed away somewhere. Have you seen it, Miss Victoria?"

"Your ewes never come this way, Lazarus, and you know it."

"It was a scrawny ewe with a black lamb."

Victoria looked at him sharply.

"If I should come trespassing on Black Valley, what would *you* say?"

"What would I say, *niña?* Why, you can go wherever you like and nobody will take it amiss."

The little girl said nothing. She led her donkey along by the rein and sipped the honey now and then from a flower.

"I have found a swarm of bees near here," said the peasant, changing the conversation.

Victoria looked at him suspiciously.

"Didn't you promise me that you would drive the bees away when you found one?"

"Yes, *niña.*"

"Are you going to?"

"Yes, *niña.*"

"When?"

"Whenever you want me to."

The little girl thought for a moment. Then she dropped the bridle of her donkey, who would not move now if a thunderbolt were to fall at his side, and climbed

to the top of the gulch to see if she could be observed from the house.

The fields were deserted. The bright colored cicadas were singing in the grass, hot and dry in the sun. In the distance the house lay as if asleep in the shade of the *aguaribays.*

She climbed down again to the bottom of the gulch and jumped on her donkey.

"Where are the bees?" she asked. Lazarus pointed the place out to her and the two of them started toward it, along the slippery bottom of the *cometierra,* which was covered here and there with a soft carpet of green, in which the red daisies shone like live coals.

When Victoria reached the foot of the hollow tree Flavia caught sight of her blue dress. Again she raised her hands to her breast to quiet the beating of her heart.

It is *she!* It is she!

She could not distinguish her plainly, for the *churqui*-bushes and the stone wall obscured her view, but to feel her near was enough to make her poor heart throb as if it would burst.

In order better to conceal herself, she knelt down and crept on her knees to the tree where the bees were, without once taking her eyes from the spot of color that formed the child's dress.

How could she have left her child to the care of others? She could not comprehend it now and she did not want to think of it. For now she was here and she would keep her with her always. . . .

She was on the verge of jumping over the stone wall

which separated them, when she remembered the message which Lazarus had brought her, and hesitated. Suppose that Victoria still did not wish to see her!

She was so near her that she could hear her voice.

"This hollow tree," the child was saying, "is on our property."

"Yes, *niña,*" assented Lazarus.

"Then this swarm of bees, which is on our property, is not yours, but mine."

The overseer laughed at this characteristic sally.

"I have been watching it for you," he said simply, and he began to build a fire beneath the tree, while up above the big round ball hanging from one of the branches, hummed with the buzzing of the bees.

He gathered a little wood and placed it on the burning twigs. The smoke began to rise in a thin column, driving the bees away.

Lazarus caught a glimpse of Flavia behind the *churqui*-bushes.

"I am going after a bag to wrap the honey-comb in after we get it out," he said.

It was an excuse to go away and leave Flavia alone with the child.

The little girl stood tending the fire.

"Do you like honey, Victoria?" she heard a voice asking her.

She turned around quickly and found herself face to face with Flavia.

"Who are you?" she asked impetuously.

The poor woman's voice trembled as she continued:

"I have some cases of honey from Castilian bees, Victoria. Would you like some?"

"But who are you?" insisted the child, drawing back a few steps.

"I'll give it all to you!"

Flavia held out her arms. The little girl gave a cry and ran away. She was not afraid, but she was embarrassed to have a stranger talk to her so familiarly.

When she saw the child disappear Flavia felt as if she had awakened again from a happy dream. She sat down near the abandoned fire and burst out crying.

Why had she fled from her? Would she ever see her again? Oh, why had she run away?

She looked up then and saw her standing motionless a short distance away, watching her with profound interest.

Flavia did not call to her, for she felt sure that she would run away again. She waited for Victoria's curiosity to overcome her. The fire died down and Flavia threw some more wood on it.

On seeing this the little girl came up angrily.

"This is mine!" she said. "And who are you?"

But when she saw that the beautiful woman's eyes were full of tears, she felt her anger die away.

She came nearer and stood with her back to her donkey, who was quietly nibbling some branches.

"Don't go away, Victoria," said Flavia.

"Who are you?" the child insisted again.

"Do you really want to know who I am?"

"Yes. And why you have come here."

"To see you!"

"Oh! You are Flavia! Flavia!" she cried in fury.

"Yes, I am Flavia," she answered sadly. "Who told you that I have brought misfortune to your house?"

"Papa told me."

"But it is not true!"

"It is! It was because of you that my mother went away!"

"It isn't true! It isn't true!"

"My mother!" Victoria said again and she felt the same strange emotion as on the night when Camargo had spoken to her of her mother.

Flavia drew near her.

"Your mother . . ." she said in a tone so low that the child could just hear her, ". . . I am your mother!"

A voice in the child's heart told her that this woman was telling the truth.

Still, she paused for a minute before she spoke. She looked at Flavia and seeing her outstretched arms, she did not run away, but stepped back and gave utterance to her grievances.

"If it is true that you are my mother, why don't you live with me?"

How was Flavia to explain her story and make her child believe her?

Abashed by that question, she sat down on a stone beside the fire without saying a word. Victoria followed her, and when she saw her weeping she threw herself into her arms and wept, too.

"You say you are my mother. Why do you want to deceive me?"

"I am not deceiving you, my little daughter."

"Then why do you live there with my father's enemies?"

"Do you think you can understand my story?"

"Is it a story?"

"Yes."

"Tell it to me . . . but why don't you come home with me now?"

The child's words were interrupted by her mother's kisses, as Flavia with her daughter pressed close to her breast, felt all her conflicting emotions fuse into one holy passion. And Victoria, who believed in her now, she did not know why, returned her mother's kisses and moistened her cheeks with her hot tears.

They heard a noise as if someone were approaching.

Flavia stood up, dried her own eyes and those of her daughter.

"It is a story which no one must know."

"Not even I?"

"You, yes, for it is your story as well as mine. If your father told you what you told Lazarus, it was because he did not want me to see you."

"Oh! Why not?"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

She spoke hurriedly, for she heard Lazarus riding up. The child drank in her words, ready now to believe everything, for was this not her mother?

"I will tell you the story — not to-day, though, for Lazarus is coming. Some other day when we are alone. But don't let anybody — anybody at all — know that you have seen me . . ."

"Why not?"

At that moment the overseer arrived with the bag which he had gone to fetch. He heard Flavia's voice saying gently to Camargo's daughter:

"If you like honey, I will bring you some."

Chapter XI

THE ANONYMOUS LETTER

"DID your father ever talk to you about his affairs?" Señor de Viscarra asked Gracián.

"Never," answered the boy.

The two were crossing the Valley at twilight, when the mountains turn blue in the shadows.

Don Jesús walked with long, even strides. He carried his shotgun and kept a sharp lookout for any game which might cross their path. Gracián trotted along beside him. It was hard for him to keep pace with his guardian.

They had started out to hunt vizcachas. There was a thickly populated colony of them back in the fields through which the road passed to Camargo's house.

"You receive now, Gracián, a hundred and fifty pesos a month from the rent of your house, and with the interest on some stock which your father bought your income will probably amount to two hundred and fifty pesos. This is more than enough for a student. We can save at least two-thirds of it and put it in the bank. Then when you are of age you will be well fixed and can take up whatever profession you wish, without considering the expense."

Gracián agreed. But he felt no particular interest in the matter. He had never given a thought to his fortune, knowing merely that, though modest, it was sufficient to keep him from poverty.

It was the hour when the owls hoot, the vizcachas leave their burrows, and the bats flit like black spots against the blue depths of the sky.

Near a tumble-down hut, in the shadow of some acacias which the locusts had eaten bare, the vizcachas had dug their holes in the dry, chalky earth.

Don Jesús and Gracián crouched down behind the adobe walls and waited for some of the animals to come out, so as to have a shot at them at close range.

Señor de Viscarra did not see a man come out from inside the hut and run toward the Hill, but he suddenly heard the sound of a horse galloping and he jumped up, shading his eyes with his hand to protect them from the afterglow in the western sky.

"Look over there, Gracián," he said to the boy. "Can you see anything?"

"I see a man on horseback."

"That is right. Can you tell the color of the horse?"

"No, *señor*."

"All right. It is a black one — probably Camargo's horse — and he is no doubt the rider."

He spoke as if he were replying to some questions which he had asked himself.

"We did not see anyone on the road, did we?"

"No, *señor*."

"Then where did he come from? He must have

been here, on my property, this side of the wall. . . ."

"And the horse?" asked Gracián. "How could it get in when there is no gate?"

"He must have left the horse on the other side and come in on foot. Don't you think so?"

Gracián did not know what to think.

Señor de Viscarra threw himself on the ground and pointed his gun toward the vizcacha burrows. His back was turned toward Camargo's Hill.

There was a thick clump of thorny *chañares* near by and he suspected that his neighbor must have left his horse there, if he really had crossed over onto his land.

What could be his object in trespassing on his property?

He knew that Camargo had been enraged by the decision in the law-suit and that he had only just returned to his ranch after a prolonged absence.

What was he plotting and planning now?

For a long time they waited in profound silence. It was growing darker, but every vizcacha hole formed a yellow spot and it would be easy to distinguish the animals as they came out.

The valley lay before them like the nave of a great church, full of that sonorous stillness that magnifies the slightest noise.

In the direction of the clump of bushes on the other side of the wall, they heard a faint sound, as if a pebble had become dislodged and rolled to the ground. Señor de Viscarra jumped to his feet, alarmed, and looked about him. He could see nothing in the dark-

ness and no one could have seen him, half hidden as he was by the old hut, but he felt vaguely uneasy and changed his position so that his back was no longer toward the Hill.

At that instant, as his form was outlined against the lighter background of the horizon, a shot rang out and a bullet buried itself in the wall of the hut, a few centimeters from his head.

"How stupid!" he exclaimed, jumping aside. "Why should anyone shoot in this direction?"

He looked around cautiously. He could see nothing.

Gracián was trembling. Don Jesús took him by the hand and led him to the other side of the hut, where they would be safe from any further shots from the thicket.

"What was it?" asked the boy.

Don Jesús did not answer.

"What a confoundedly good aim!" he murmured to himself. "If I had not moved at the moment, he would have hit me squarely."

And he added aloud:

"It was some foolish fellow out shooting vizcachas with a rifle. Come, Gracián, it is too dark now and after that noise we cannot expect the animals to come out of their holes before midnight."

They started off along the wall. Don Jesús looked to see if anyone was on the other side. Suddenly a noise like a roll of drums broke the stillness of the night.

"It is only a drove of donkeys," said Don Jesús to

Gracián as the boy stood still terrified. "They are on their way back from Cosquín where the peasants take their wood."

"And that noise?"

"Those are the forked stakes of the packsaddles. They are hanging loose now and hit against each other as the animals move along."

They stopped for a moment and watched seven or eight donkeys come walking in single file down the stony road, nibbling the *churquis* which grew along the wayside.

"Good evening," said the old man who was driving them.

"Good evening," answered Don Jesús, approaching him. "Did you see anyone on the Hill just now?"

"Yes, *señor*, right over there!" and he pointed back toward the stone wall.

"Who was it?"

"Someone on foot — hunting, probably."

"Could you tell who it was?"

"No, *señor*, I couldn't see him very clearly."

"Do you know Don Pablo Camargo?"

"Yes, *señor*. It looked something like him."

They wished him good-night, he touched his hat, and Gracián and his guardian went back to the house.

"Don't say a word to anyone about this," Don Jesús advised the boy.

At the table that night he was morose and little inclined to talk. Flavia, on the other hand, seemed to be in good spirits. She told the children stories and taught

them the virtues of the mountain herbs which she had gathered that afternoon.

"This is thyme," she said, showing them the fragrant, fragile little plant with its purple flowers. "Its tea is good for colds. This is the herb of San Roque. It looks like thyme, but its flowers are golden yellow. It is good for the stomach. This is *barba de piedra.* It staunches blood."

"This is the fruit of the *chañar,*" cried Mirra, taking a handful of golden balls the size of olives out of the pockets of her apron and throwing them on the white oil cloth which covered the table.

"The *chañar,*" continued Flavia, "is good for chest troubles. And the water of the *santalucía* heals delicate eyes. The *doradilla* relieves headaches. Wounds are washed with an infusion of cardoon, this thorny plant here . . . and if children are timid, they can be cured by a tea made from the root of the *quiebrarados,* this coarse straw-plant with the yellow flowers . . ."

"Flavia," said her brother suddenly from his place on the sofa where he had been sitting quietly under the lamp, "I have something to say to you. Let the children go to bed. It is time."

Flavia said nothing. What could her brother have to say to her which the children should not hear?

She had been so happy lately in seeing her daughter and in being able to indulge her mother-love, pent up for so many years. Was something to stand in the way of this happiness?

"What is it, Jesús?" she asked anxiously as soon as

the children had left, noticing that her brother closed the doors as if he were afraid of being overheard.

"Have you ever seen Camargo since you came back to Black Valley?"

The question terrified her.

"Sometimes."

"Where?"

Señor de Viscarra's eyes searched her pale, beautiful face.

"I have seen him sometimes on the road coming from Cosquín . . ." she murmured.

Don Jesús began to walk up and down the room, his hands clasped behind him. It was a great relief to Flavia not to have his glance resting upon her any longer.

"He was in love with you once," he said, and with a great effort he added in a dull, lifeless tone: "And they tell me that he is still your lover . . ."

Flavia stood up impetuously.

"Who said so?"

"I did not believe it," Señor de Viscarra hastened to add. "I could not believe it, Flavia, for I have faith in the nobility of my blood — and yours! It was impossible for me to believe it."

Flavia sat down and said simply:

"I am glad of that. Whoever said it, spoke from malice."

"Do you know who said it?"

"I can guess."

"Will you tell me his name?"

"Why should I? You have heard his story."

"I misspoke," answered Don Jesús. "I did not *hear* anything. I received a letter. . . ."

"A letter?"

"I do not know the handwriting. I could hardly expect to."

As he spoke Don Jesús handed his sister a sheet of paper written over in a clumsy hand.

"How shameful! Shameful!" cried Flavia as she recognized Camargo's writing and felt with horror that her whole terrible secret was about to be bared.

She had thought that the letter must have been written by Lazarus, for lately she had been obliged to check harshly his audacious flattery. But it was not Lazarus — it was no other than her lover himself! — beside himself with rage and stooping to the basest treachery in his desire to wound his enemy's pride!

"It is shameful indeed!" declared Don Jesús. "Who do you think can be the author?"

"Nobody . . . Nobody. I can't imagine who . . ."

"But you suspected someone . . ."

"No, no!"

"You spoke of a spiteful person," insisted Señor de Viscarra, stopping and looking at her suspiciously. "Whom did you mean? Why aren't you frank with me?"

And Flavia, frightened, confessed her suspicion.

"I thought it might be Lazarus . . ."

"Why Lazarus? What difference can it make to him what you do or don't do?"

"Oh, haven't you ever suspected . . . ?"

"What?"

"Haven't you ever realized that this man might fall in love with me?"

Don Jesús' face showed his amazement.

"And can he be the author of this?" he asked, angrily crushing the piece of paper which lay abandoned on the table.

Flavia did not answer immediately. She did not know what to say. She felt as if her eyes were blindfolded and she must feel her way. So much depended on every word! If she accused Lazarus she would save Camargo, but what would she gain by that? She hesitated no longer.

"I thought it might be Lazarus because he is in love with me and, of course, he has no hope. I thought of him because a man who has been scorned is capable of base deeds . . ."

"That is true!"

"But . . . it is not he!"

She spoke furiously, as if she could not wait to pronounce the words which would forever raise a wall between her past life and her future one, and Don Jesús realized that she must know who had written the letter.

"Who was it?" he asked again in a commanding tone. "If it was not Lazarus, who was it?"

"Can't you guess? Oh!" and she began to laugh bitterly. "It was he — your enemy! Camargo himself is the author of this!"

She seized the paper and smoothed it out in front of him.

"When I was engaged to him, he used to write to me and I know his hand. He has tried to disguise it here, but it is unmistakable. It is he, himself! He wants to insult you!"

She spoke wildly, as if intoxicated with her own grief, but she quickly grew calm again when she heard her brother say:

"I see, I see it all clearly, Flavia. I would never have believed this disgraceful accusation, but you have taken a great load from my mind."

Flavia walked over to her brother. She took his head between her hands and covered his hair with kisses.

"I had decided, Flavia, that even though the accusation was false, it would be better for you to leave Black Valley and go to live with our brother in order to avoid any gossip, but . . ."

"But what?" asked Flavia, terrified at the thought that she might be sent away from her daughter.

"But I need you, too, and if this plot is his, I see no reason to give him the pleasure of knowing that it has had any effect."

So great was Flavia's relief at these words that she threw herself on the sofa sobbing.

"Let me stay here, Jesús," she entreated. "Let me live and die at your side."

And when she read her brother's assent in his eyes, she added:

"Don't say anything to poor Lazarus. Why should you mention it to him?"

"I shall say nothing," answered Señor de Viscarra, tearing Camargo's letter into tiny bits and throwing the pieces out to the night wind which carried them away like a handful of moths.

Chapter XII

GRACIÁN'S PROMISE

MARCH arrived and with it autumn, the season of changeful days, some golden and bright, others dark and dreary. Gracián became seriously ill.

During the long period of his convalescence Mirra was always at his side, entertaining him with her merry tales and charming him with her affectionate attentions.

He would never forget her, he thought. Merely to think of it was absurd. She had become a part of his life and he could not imagine himself happy anywhere but here at her side in Black Valley among the friendly peasants whom he loved for her sake.

It had been necessary to send word to the rector of the school that he could not return until some time after classes had begun. The delay more than compensated the boy for his illness, for it made it possible for him to stay so much longer in Mirra's home.

One day when he had fully recovered, Señor de Viscarra said:

"Day after to-morrow we must leave."

Mirra wept desperately that night, thinking how lonely the winter would be.

Before going to bed she met Gracián in the corridor

and gave him a little ring which she had worn for years. It had been a present from her father.

"Papa will scold when he hears that I have lost it — for that is what I shall tell him — but I don't care . . ."

She did not mind suffering a little on his account, she told him. She wanted him to keep the ring always, even if she should die that winter of loneliness and grief.

Gracián, moved by the same tender feelings, listened to her seriously.

"You won't die, Mirra. Nobody in the country ever does. I shall probably be the one. Will you forget me, then? If I die in the city I will have them send the ring back to you."

Mirra shook her head.

"No! In the city nobody dies of love. It is only in the country that sorrow can be strong enough to kill."

The bad weather the next day made the children hope that Gracián's departure would be postponed again.

A cold, wet breeze was brushing against the trees which shivered under the dreary sky, overcast with heavy, ash-colored clouds.

It was late, but the sun was still completely hidden and one could not distinguish the earth from the sky. The mountains seemed taller and more forbidding than ever.

The children went out for a last ramble together and rejoiced to see the rain coming on.

At ten o'clock there was every sign of an approaching storm. Fine bits of mist blew in one's face, gathered in glistening drops on the meadows, or dripped like rain from the trees. The countryside looked as if tiny specks of ash dust were floating in the air and had been heaped up in piles in the gorges.

On the other side of the wall a little boy rode by straddling the haunches of a burro and holding a kid which he had laid across his saddle in front of him. The little animal was bleating pitifully, as if it felt a presentiment that its end was approaching.

As he came opposite the children, he pointed to the horizon, which was covered with a thick cloud.

"It's raining up in the mountains!"

Mirra clapped her hands with joy.

"You won't go to-morrow! When it rains up there, it rains here, too!"

A little later they heard the first drops fall in among the cornstalks which had turned yellow and dry in the autumn. They began to run toward the house. They reached it, drenched with the rain which was now pouring down and hurrying in muddy rivulets on all the paths.

"Bad weather, my boy, to be walking out-of-doors," said Señor de Viscarra.

Later it cleared again and the sun shone brightly on the soaked earth. Gracián was busy packing now and could not go out, but Mirra seized the opportunity to take a walk through the Valley without saying where she was going.

She had been puzzled for some time by Flavia's conduct, especially by her mysterious journeys to the orchard, from which she returned with her eyes restless and full of a strange fire. To-day Mirra had seen her send Amoroso on an errand before luncheon and now at siesta time he had not yet returned.

At this hour his mistress entered the dining room, took a piece of bread and some cold meat, wrapped it in her apron and went out, casting a quick glance toward Gracián's room where he and Mirra were busy with his baggage.

She had gone only a short distance when the little girl stole after her. For Mirra had seen her aunt pass by, and hoped that if she followed she might get some explanation of Flavia's strange behavior.

As she took the road to the orchard, she stopped and gave a cry, for suddenly, as if from beneath the earth, the grotesque figure of Amoroso rose before her. He began to laugh — the disagreeable, mirthless laugh of an idiot.

"Don't be afraid, my dear," he said, blocking her path.

Mirra stood still.

"Have you been drinking?" she asked.

"Do I seem to you to be a little drunk?"

"Yes."

"That is because you don't like me."

As he spoke, the peon took a huge bite from a piece of cold meat which he held in his hand and threw a piece of bread into his large, ill-shaped mouth.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed with his mouth full. "You don't like me, do you, *niña?*"

"And who could?" asked Mirra with a gesture that clearly showed her repugnance.

Amoroso became serious, as if the remark had hurt him.

"That's just it!" he said with so much humility that Mirra was touched.

"What are you doing here?"

"Ho, ho, ho!" he laughed again, and Mirra looked at him suspiciously.

"Didn't you have your dinner?"

"No, *niña.*"

"Why not? What are you doing here? Did papa send you?"

"No, *niña.*"

"Who sent you?"

"I sent myself!"

He said this with a triumphant air and began to laugh again. His little eyes shone maliciously.

"Didn't Flavia come this way?"

Amoroso stopped laughing.

"No, *niña.*"

"Very well," said Mirra looking down at the ground. "I see there is no use trying to talk to you. You don't tell the truth. Look! Here is Flavia's footprint!" and she began to run in the direction of the orchard.

But on hearing Amoroso give a sharp whistle she stopped and turned back, realizing that this must be a signal that he and Flavia had agreed upon.

"What did you whistle for?" she asked crossly.

The peon leaned tranquilly against the trunk of a willow-tree and looked at her.

"Because I like music, *niña*."

And he began to whistle a tango, grinning malevolently.

"You are not as simple as people think!"

Amoroso hummed a *gaucho* melody between his teeth.

"You have as many tricks as an old donkey!" exclaimed the little girl as she jumped over the ditch and walked back down the path.

If she pretended to go back, Amoroso would probably let Flavia know that the danger had passed; and sure enough, she presently heard another whistle, distinct in tone from the first one.

Then Mirra started to run, taking a roundabout route which would eventually lead her to the orchard by way of another path.

It brought her to a muddy glen through which she could walk without being seen. She plowed through the mire in her white sandals, jumped over a rustic fence, scratching her knees, and finally entered the orchard.

What could Flavia be doing in such a place on such a day?

It was not long before she discovered the answer. She followed the wall along until she reached the farther end of the enclosure. There she saw her aunt, sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree, talking to someone, who, to judge from the mystery with which their

meeting was surrounded, must have come from the Hill. Mirra drew nearer, paying no heed to the weeds which lashed her like cold blows from a whip as they bent under her feet. At last she was close enough to hear voices and to see plainly. The person with whom Flavia was talking, whose head was resting on Flavia's breast, was . . . her enemy, Camargo's daughter!

It was easy to see that they loved each other. Mirra realized this with horror, for Gracián had told her of their evil neighbor's attempt on her father's life and she could not understand how Flavia could be friendly with these people who were plotting her brother's ruin and perhaps his death.

Through the underbrush Mirra watched her aunt stand up to take leave and she saw Victoria kiss her tenderly.

"Oh, my little darling, my little darling!" she heard Flavia say. Then she heard her mention Gracián's name, and trembled.

"Gracián is going away to-morrow. Have you seen him this summer?"

"Yes — two or three times — from a distance."

"He is a nice boy. To-morrow he is leaving. I wish you two could be friends."

"That is impossible!" cried Victoria angrily.

"Why?"

"Because he is Mirra's friend."

"What difference does that make? Some day he may grow tired of Mirra."

The child did not answer. Mirra's heart fluttered as she listened.

"Gracián is a fine boy," Flavia went on. "The next time he comes you must know him better so that you can have someone to play with, someone to care for."

Victoria said nothing.

"Don't you mind being alone so much?"

"No. I like best to be alone."

"Gracián would make you a good comrade."

"I don't like Gracián. He is Mirra's friend and he cannot be a friend of mine."

"But if he were not Mirra's friend? If he should grow tired of her?"

"Well, . . . then it might be different," answered Victoria seriously.

And Mirra in indignation heard Flavia's voice prophesying:

"By next year he will be tired of her. Then I will tell him to come and see you. You can go walking together and you will not need to be always alone . . . my darling!"

She covered her with passionate kisses and started back toward the house.

Mirra, in her hiding place, began to cry. Soon she heard Victoria move away in the opposite direction. She did not want to look at her. Her heart was as heavy as if she had been overwhelmed with a great misfortune.

It began to rain again and she only just reached the

house without getting wet. Her father was looking at her.

"Where have you been?" he asked severely.

She did not want to tell her secret to him or to anyone — not even to Gracián, toward whom she cast a shy, sad glance from her tear-stained eyes. She would not explain why she had left the house, so for punishment her father shut her up in her own room, where she spent the rest of the afternoon looking out through the wet panes at the dark valley wrapped in its veil of mist. She was so disheartened that she could no longer rejoice at the bad weather, even if it did delay Gracián's journey. Flavia's words were still humming in her ears and she was afraid that they might be telling the truth.

What difference did it make whether he went to-day or to-morrow, if he would forget her after all?

There was no twilight. Night came on suddenly like a curtain falling over the valley, but Mirra kept her face pressed to the window-pane, peering out into the darkness. She had turned the key and refused to come out when they called her to supper, so her father ordered that they should give her nothing to eat.

The darkness made her sleepy and she finally fell into a doze with her head against the window sill. She sobbed in her sleep, for her dreams were sad.

A tap on the window-pane awakened her.

"Mirra! Mirra!" a voice said outside.

She looked in bewilderment out on the fields wrapped in the darkness.

"Mirra! Mirra!" the voice repeated, and the little girl saw that someone was crouching below. Her room was next her father's, but her window opened out on the meadow. It had no grating, but was enclosed with a little stone balcony.

She recognized Gracián in the darkness and could hardly suppress a cry of joy.

She was about to open her door when she remembered that her father might waken at the noise, so instead she opened the window, through which the cold night wind entered.

With one leap the boy sprang over the railing of the balcony. It must have been late, for all the house was dark and silent.

"Mirra," said Gracián, "why didn't you come to the table? Aren't you hungry? I've brought you something to eat."

And he showed her a package of roasted corn and some cheeses which Tránsito had made that afternoon.

But Mirra began to cry and would not eat.

"No, no! I'm not hungry!"

"What's the matter?"

"I wish I could die!"

"Why, Mirra?"

She did not answer at first. Then, as he kept on asking her, she put her arms around his neck, pressing her wet cheek to his and whispered in his ear, half ashamed to make the confession:

"I will never forget you, Gracián, but you are going to forget me!"

"I?" exclaimed the boy in surprise.

"I know that you are going to forget me and I know why."

"I never will. What could possibly make me forget you?"

"Victoria!"

"Who is Victoria?" he asked astonished.

"Camargo's daughter — my enemy! When you come for your next vacation you will have grown tired of me and you will ask her to go with you to hunt birds' nests and to walk over the hills — and Flavia will be glad!"

Her sobs shook her so that she could hardly speak. Gracián kissed her wet cheek, feeling the little girl's hot tears on his lips. He did not know what to say except "No, I won't! No, I won't!" and this did not seem to comfort her.

She said nothing to him of the source of her worries.

Suddenly she stopped crying and pushed him away from her, saying in her usual confident voice:

"Gracián, will you forget me?"

"No, Mirra."

"Truly?"

"Truly, Mirra."

"Very well, but if you do forget me . . ."

"I won't! I won't!"

"If you should forget me, Gracián, don't let it be on her account!"

"On whose account?"

"On hers! My enemy's — Camargo's daughter's!"

Gracián promised and he thought he saw Mirra smile through her tears.

"Aren't you hungry, Mirra?" he asked again.

"Yes, now I am," she confessed and she began to eat the smuggled provisions.

The boy went back to his room. Mirra closed her window and fell asleep.

The cocks were crowing at dawn when Gracián awoke.

What could he have been dreaming that made his pillow wet with tears?

He thought for a moment and remembered that he had dreamt that someone had told him that this would be his last vacation at Black Valley, that he would forget Mirra, as she had said, and that she would wait vainly for his return.

He jumped out of bed and opened the shutters to let in the light of dawn. In the corral he could already hear the trampling of the horses which the peons were saddling for the journey.

When Mirra arose the horses were standing in the yard.

It was no longer raining, but the air was oppressive. Thick, white clouds floated in a deep blue sky and under the heat of the sun, which came out for a few moments, the earth exhaled a vapor impregnated with the heavy fragrance of those flowers which blossom in damp weather.

The *aguaciles* were buzzing in the shade of the trees

and in the chalices of the *santalucías* there were large drops of dew.

"The *aguaciles* say that we are going to have some more rain," remarked Lazarus.

"But we shall have time to reach Cosquín without getting wet," answered Señor de Viscarra, mounting lightly.

Mirra had gone back to her room and Gracián had followed her to bid her good-by. But as soon as she heard the horses galloping off she came out into the arched corridor and watched the two travelers ride down the road until they were lost to view on the other side of the hill.

Then she stretched out her arms towards them. On turning her head she saw that Flavia had been standing there beside her, watching them, too.

They said nothing to each other. In the eyes of both there was a gleam of defiance.

But Mirra was comforted, for in her ears rang Gracián's promise.

Chapter XIII

THE THREAT

"HATRED," said Señor de Viscarra, "ought never to dwell in an honorable man's heart." Lazarus' frown, as he rode along beside him, was as black as an evil thought. They were crossing the frost-covered yellow fields. The horses' hoofs sank deep in pampas grass that sparkled as though it were hung with diamonds.

"Vengeance is a low passion," continued Don Jesús, without looking at his peon. "A man may kill his enemy in the heat of a quarrel, but it is neither Christian nor honorable to plot in cold blood to satisfy a grievance or avenge an insult."

In the distance, on the crest of the hill which sloped gently up until it seemed to touch the glassy blue sky, rose the figure of a man, also on horseback.

"There he is!" cried Lazarus in a stifled voice, pointing to the horseman with the butt of his whip.

"Who?" asked Don Jesús, half closing his eyes so that he could see more clearly. "Oh! It is he!"

Lazarus pulled at his rein, as if to halt, but a look from his master made him change his mind.

"Why that, Lazarus? The highway is public prop-

erty, even when it crosses his land. These country roads have been open for years. Before he was born the people from Black Valley rode over this route on their way to the sierras."

"But they say he has ordered it shut off by a fence."

"They say so, but I doubt that anyone will carry out his orders. He would not want to do it himself. He has no right to, and he knows it."

Señor de Viscarra rode calmly forward in the direction from which his mortal enemy was approaching.

It was the first time he had met Pablo Camargo since receiving the anonymous letter in his handwriting. He had more reason than ever to wish to avoid meeting him, but his face showed not the slightest repugnance as they passed each other. He sat straight in his saddle with his usual easy grace. Camargo cast a lowering look of hatred upon him.

"I thought he was going to speak to you," said Lazarus when they had gone far enough to be out of hearing.

"What could he have to say to me?"

Lazarus shrugged his shoulders and at the bend of the road turned his head to look back surreptitiously at Camargo, who was galloping on as if he wanted to make the road bear the fury of his overwrought nerves.

After all, it was he, Lazarus, who hated him most!

Whether because he had become tired of waiting, or because his absurd passion for his master's sister had grown beyond his control, he had come to feel a raging

jealousy of this man who exercised such mysterious power over Flavia.

Had he not seen her go out in the night, defying cold, shame, and the dangers that lurked in the mountains, just to speak to him?

He would have liked to tell his master of this, but the time had not come when such information could be turned to his own ends, so he waited, torturing himself with fantastic dreams.

He longed to see her despised by everyone, stripped bare of pride, brought as low as filth that is thrust aside with the foot, for only then could he hope to enter her life.

Meanwhile he sought in every possible way to arouse the suspicion of the upright, generous owner of Black Valley.

If he should say to Don Jesús: "*Señor,* your sister, Doña Flavia, does not deserve to bear your name or to live in your house," would his master believe him? And could he expect a noble and honorable man, a Viscarra, to spy upon her as he himself had done?

It was more probable that Señor de Viscarra would call his sister before him and say: "Lazarus has accused you of this. What have you to say for yourself, Flavia?"

It was better, after all, to continue to play the part of the humble servant enjoying his master's confidence and to try to stir up his wrath against his hateful neighbor whenever they talked alone together, even when

as now, Señor de Viscarra would topple over the whole structure of his intrigue with a single gentle word.

"But," Lazarus objected this time, "Camargo does not think as you do. He does not forgive anything that he considers an insult and he never forgets his evil intentions."

"Can we know another man's thoughts, Lazarus?"

"Not unless he puts them into words, *señor.* But this man does."

"A man may say many things when he is drunk. And as a certain old book, which we ought to read more often, says: 'He who speaks much, errs much.' "

"I have heard, *señor,* that he has said again that he will meet you some day where no judge can help you and then . . ."

"Who heard him say that?"

"Why, lots of people, I guess. He never tries to conceal anything."

" 'Lots of people' means nobody. Who heard him say it? So far no one has ever come to me and said 'I heard him!' But even if someone had, we cannot expect a drunken man to use discretion in his words, any more than we can expect a blind man to walk with a firm step."

Señor de Viscarra and his peon were on their way to buy some ewes at a ranch up in the mountains.

They had already passed the buildings on Camargo's Hill and were following the winding road across a cornfield. A man with a wooden plow had begun to remove the stubble to make ready for the new sowing

and behind the oxen the earth lay trim and fragrant in the sunshine of the wintry morning.

Don Jesús stopped. He knew the farmer and he wanted to show him that he bore the Hill people no ill will, in spite of the annoyances which they caused him.

"Good morning, friend."

The man came over to the fence.

"A few days ago I bought some cows marked with the brand of the Olain ranch. . . . Do you know that brand?"

"I ought to . . ." answered the man hesitatingly. "A V in the right ear and an inverted one in the left."

"That's right. They strayed off from my land in search of their old haunts. A short-horned heifer went with them. Have you seen her, by chance?"

"Yes, *señor*. I saw her when the herd passed . . . along the lower road."

"Very well. You won't see her again. She has been slaughtered. My peons found the whole herd up in the Mazanas, but there was only one quarter of the heifer left and that was hanging from a tree."

The peasant was silent. He began to twirl the hat which he held in his hand.

"And they say that you are the one that slaughtered her."

"They say hard things about a poor fellow, *señor*."

"Those who told me seemed to have it on good authority. Do you know the penalty of killing another person's cattle?"

"I can guess it, *señor.*"

"Do you know that it means several years' imprisonment?"

"I didn't know it, but I thought so."

"It is a serious crime. If you have committed it . . ."

"I didn't, *señor.* I am telling you the truth."

"I did not see you do it, but people who did see you told me about it."

"Somebody has it in for me," protested the peasant, picking up his ox-goad to hide his discomfiture.

"Let us not discuss your innocence until I accuse you. I stopped to tell you this. If there is poverty in your home, if you do not earn enough to live like a respectable man, my house is always open to the poor. . . ."

"Thank you, *señor.*"

"This is not the first damage you people have done me, and it will probably not be the last. But the man who plans these things is more to blame than the one who carries them out. I forgive both, as I ask God to forgive me."

He touched the spurs to his horse and started on down the road, followed by the puzzled glance of the peasant, who could not understand why this man should show mercy to him when he knew him to be the abject tool of his implacable enemy.

On the following day at evening Don Jesús and Lazarus returned to Black Valley, driving ahead of them a flock of lean-looking, white-fleeced sheep. The animals lurched down the Hill in a mass, looking list-

lessly at the barren fields where nothing was growing except tawny *churquis* which only a goat will eat.

The day was crisp and golden and under the blue mantle of the clear air the world seemed small and pitiful, the sky vast and beautiful.

"The world is God's handiwork and bears His brand," said Señor de Viscarra to his peon, who was riding in silence at his side. "And in the purposes of His Providence everything has its place — even sin . . . even crime."

They could see the patio of Black Valley before them and near the buildings stood a little, white figure — Mirra, no doubt, busy with her tasks.

At the sight of her Señor de Viscarra was moved with tenderness. He felt strong — strong enough to live for a century! But if anything *should* happen to him, what would become of his daughter up here in these remote regions with no one but Flavia to care for her?

And could he trust her to Flavia's care? Who knew what secrets his sister harbored in her soul — secrets which even he, who had been like a father to her, was not permitted to share?

Señor de Viscarra was troubled by these thoughts which Lazarus' words and recent events had both suggested to him.

When he reached home, the first person who came out to meet him was Flavia. She gave him her hand in greeting and turned to go in, but he called her back.

"Flavia! Flavia!"

And when again she stood near him he leaned down from his horse, said a few casual words to cover up his thoughts, and then bent over and kissed her, as if he had come back from a long journey.

Flavia trembled. In her hair there were still some tangled bits of straw from the mountainside, where she had been that very morning long before daybreak, driven by her own desire to win back her old place in Camargo's heart — for he only sent for her now at rare intervals.

Should she speak of him to her brother?

The moment was propitious for confidences. An undercurrent of tenderness united them. She could confess to him at last the anguish in which she was living — a prisoner, yet one without the strength or the desire to escape from her prison.

But she held her peace and the determined lines in her beautiful forehead seemed to grow deeper. She had seen Mirra run toward her father; she had watched him lift her up until her feet touched his stirrup and then cover her with silent kisses.

The child was her real enemy!

How much of her wretched history did she know? Nothing, perhaps. They had not shared the same room for some time. Mirra could not have known of her nightly assignations and certainly must be ignorant of their purpose.

And yet Mirra seemed to read the meaning of her every gesture; to know that when she laughed it was because she had seen her daughter or because she hoped

to see her soon, and that when she was cautious and constrained, it was because she was watching for an opportunity to slip away to meet her. Mirra's eyes pursued her aunt relentlessly and although Flavia was not afraid that she would accuse her of any definite act, she was conscious of a hostility that was like some great danger suspended above her head.

In the silent battle which was being waged between them, which of the two would be victorious? Mirra, young and innocent, whose only motive was her youthful love? Or Flavia, rich in the experiences which sin and sorrow bring, driven forward by all the good and evil forces which can dwell together in a human heart?

And in what would victory consist?

Mirra had grown tall that winter. She had outgrown all her dresses and Flavia was making her new ones.

Once Mirra passed by her aunt's window as she sat there sewing and found Flavia gazing off toward the distant horizon in the direction of the Hill.

The young girl walked up to the window grating, curious to see how her frocks were progressing and she could not help noticing the bitter expression in which Flavia's perfectly formed lips were set.

"Why do you tire yourself out working on my things?" she asked and there was a profound meaning in the simple words which unintentionally hurt Flavia.

"Would you do as much for me?" she asked.

"Of course I would! And more!"

At the sight of the girl's graceful figure at the window grating, Flavia was troubled. She felt somehow that Mirra was stronger than she and that her own destiny lay in her niece's hands.

She found herself suddenly eager to propitiate her and gain her good will.

"I cannot believe it," she said. "You would perhaps be willing to do something which did not cost you any great effort, but you would not undertake any really difficult task or make any great sacrifice for my sake."

These puzzling words left Mirra ill at ease. To what could her aunt be alluding? What sacrifice did she want her to make that would cost her so much?

A vague fear seized her that Flavia might speak to her of Gracián, and she did not answer.

Flavia's eyes looked into hers and she saw in their depths the old hostile flame that for a moment had been extinguished.

What had her aunt intended to say? Was it about Gracián? But what had Gracián to do with these matters?

The words which she had overheard as she crouched in the orchard on that last day of Gracián's visit, rang in her ears:

"Some day Gracián will grow tired of her and will be *your* friend."

Why did Flavia hope this so earnestly?

And who was this Victoria that Flavia had called "darling"?

That was the first puzzle that Mirra set herself to solve.

She used to wait in the house for a few moments after Flavia started out for the orchard, to allay her aunt's suspicions, and then follow after her, trailing her footsteps as she had seen the peons trail the tracks of an animal which had been lost or stolen.

Sometimes she found Amoroso standing sentinel on the path leading by the willow grove. Sometimes he appeared unexpectedly at some other place. She was obliged to use all her wits to keep this faithful watch-dog of Flavia's from warning his mistress.

In this way she had managed to witness the strange interviews between Flavia and Camargo's daughter and little by little, in the face of the passionate demonstrations of love between them, she had come to realize that they were bound together by some very close tie.

Then one day Pichana had come upon her as she was watching them in the orchard and had told her the truth.

"She is her daughter," she said.

"Her daughter!" exclaimed the child. The words threw light on many an obscure event, but they weighed heavily upon her heart. "Impossible!"

"She is her daughter. Has Pichana ever told you a lie?"

"You have told me fairy stories."

"But fairy stories are about people who don't exist. They aren't true, but they aren't lies either. She is her

daughter, and they haven't known each other very long."

"How do you know this?"

"Pichana knows more than you think."

Mirra looked into Pichana's withered black face, bony as a skull, from which her cunning eyes peered out so knowingly that they seemed to pierce through the very ground.

From where the two were hiding they could watch Flavia and her child. They could not hear what they were saying, but there was so much passionate affection in Flavia's gestures, that Mirra wondered that she had not sooner guessed the truth.

"Her daughter! You are right, she is her daughter!"

"Do you see?" said Pichana.

Mirra's imagination flew back to the far off day when her own mother was alive.

But only for a moment. Then she jumped to her feet. She saw that Pichana was observing her affectionately, patted the old woman's shoulder, and went away without another glance toward the corner where Flavia was embracing her daughter.

When Don Jesús came back from the mountains that afternoon Amoroso gave him a letter in an unfamiliar handwriting, which he had brought from Cosquín.

His master read it hastily and without comment. At suppertime he spoke of it to Flavia and Mirra, who listened with beating hearts.

It was from an uncle of Gracián's, whose name the boy had seldom mentioned, for he had left home while

Gracián was still very young and had spent most of his life abroad.

Don Jesús remembered something of the circumstances under which he had gone away. An unhappy love affair, in which some money matters had been involved, had led him first to Lima, then to Cuba, then on — God knows where — until his relatives had completely lost track of him.

And now he had returned — well on in years, alone, rich, a man of the world, to judge by his letter, and eager to renew again the bonds which his long absence had broken.

Gracián was his nearest relative. He had called on him at his school in Cordova and he wanted the boy to spend the vacation with him this year at his country home in the province of Cordova. He wanted to initiate him into the management of the estate, since there was every reason to believe that some day the boy would be his heir.

Don Jesús had turned his back to the light as he read and he did not see the tears in Mirra's eyes. So Gracián would not come back that summer!

Flavia, too, felt apprehensive at the thought of the boy's absence.

When he finished reading the letter, Don Jesús pushed his chair back and waited for a moment for his sister or his daughter to speak.

Mirra looked at Flavia, who had turned toward her, and their glances crossed like two swords. Neither said a word.

"It seems to be a good thing," said Señor de Viscarra at last. "It is a question of Gracián's future. But I cannot let the boy go with his uncle without first finding out whether everything that the letter says is true. As his guardian I am responsible to the courts and to God for whatever happens to my ward."

And he continued to speak for some time without interruption.

That night Flavia noiselessly opened the door which opened on to the corridor and went out through the shadow-filled patio. There was no moon — no stars. Even the wind was hushed. One could hear the endless croaking of the frogs down by the dam and now and then the sound of a horse moving about as it feasted on the rich grass along the moist borders of the pond.

The shrill hoot of an owl sent a shiver of horror through Flavia's veins.

She missed the path and had to grope her way toward the secluded spot where she was to meet her lover.

Some days before, she had sent word to Camargo by Amoroso, who was an adept and faithful messenger, to come to the accustomed place. And for one — two — three nights now she had gone to meet him there.

But he had not come. As the hours dragged by, she sickened to the very depths of her soul. She was sure that daylight must find her thinner, weaker, and more exhausted in body and spirit.

She tried to wait resignedly and her eyes learned to distinguish in the darkness between the shadows of real things, the phantasms which her imagination invented,

and the ghosts of her sins which persecuted her. Her ears heard all the subtlest noises of the night — the sound of insects gnawing the rotting branches, the noise of the sap rushing to the buds of the trees, even the breathing of the birds in their nests.

She had sent for Camargo to tell him that she was resolved to marry him, even against her brother's will.

She could not live like this forever, prowling about the Valley like some nocturnal animal, deluded, exhausted, afraid of God and man — all because an enmity for which she was not to blame separated their two families.

She had endured it as long as she could. She must put an end to this life which she was leading. She would go with Camargo, if he were free. . . .

And if he were not?

In that case she did not know what she would do. She could not tell whether she would find in her soul strength enough to accept her implacable duty.

Two forces wrestled within her — the old guilty passion and her new-found mother-love. Could the two ever be wholly united? Could they ever be wholly separated?

Why had Camargo shunned her since she began to urge him to tell her what stood in the way of their marriage?

One desperate night in an effort to sound the depths of his benighted soul, whose only star was his love for her, she had asked him the ominous question:

"Are you married, Pablo?"

He did not answer.

She repeated the question, clasping her hands which looked like twin lilies in the night.

"Pablo, Pablo, if you are married, why don't you say so?"

But still he was silent.

"If you are not, what keeps you from coming to my home and claiming me as your wife?"

"*He* would never consent," answered Camargo sullenly.

"Why should we care about that? He has been unjust enough to you. If you were free, Pablo, you would come for me and take me to my daughter."

"My house is always open to you. . . . If I call you, will you come?"

Flavia felt the blood hammering in her veins and a strange rapture took possession of her as she realized what life might mean to her at his side, near her daughter, though all the rest of the world should rise and curse her.

But her tongue, more loyal to her duty than her heart, answered for her:

"If you are married, Pablo, and your wife is living, I will not come."

And she began to cry as she sat there on the ground, her head resting against his knees.

". . . I will not come."

In her secret heart she wished that some force outside herself would lift her up and carry her away to

Camargo's gloomy house upon the hill, like a dry leaf before the autumn wind.

At last she stopped repeating her question, fearing that her lover might break his silence and confess that he was not free.

If it were true and he acknowledged it, what could she do? Could she continue to yield herself to him for the sake of her daughter?

He knew now that she and Victoria were accustomed to meet, and although he never put the threat into words Flavia lived in dread of his hiding her daughter where she could never find her, if she refused to submit to his demands.

When he failed for the first time to come to their tryst, she waited for him until dawn, her elbows on her knees, her head in her motionless hands, her large eyes fixed upon the shadows in the woods.

The twinkling light of the stars showed indistinctly the outline of the trees.

The sap freezing in their tender branches made them crack with a slight, rustling sound.

For a moment Flavia raised her head, thinking that she heard his step. Then she resumed her former position.

She could not bring herself to return to the house.

"I will wait until the moon comes up," she thought.

Toward the east the jagged outline of the mountains grew more distinct. The stars faded. Then the golden moon rising above the highest peak filled the woods with

the fantastic shapes of trees, which danced before Flavia's startled eyes.

But still she did not rise.

"I will wait until the cock crows — before dawn."

But at cockcrow she did not move.

"As soon as day breaks, I will go — before the peons are up."

And she kept her vigil until then — in vain.

When she reëntered the house it was already light on the hills, but the valley was still folded in the shades of night.

On the fifth night she lost her way and wandered again from the path. When she was somewhere in the neighborhood of the dam she stopped, startled, thinking that she felt someone's breath on her neck. She ran terrified until she reached the road leading to the orchard. There her composure returned.

"Lazarus!" she said, half aloud, sure that someone was following her. At the sound of her voice the crickets round about her stopped chirping and the silence was so intense that it frightened her.

Camargo was waiting for her when she reached the corner of the enclosure. He was full of remorse for having made her suffer and aflame as never before with his unhappy passion.

He told her his whole story — a story many years old, now — and Flavia learned that what she had suspected was true, that a short time after their engagement had been broken he had married a woman in the Banda Oriental, and that his wife was still living there.

They had separated soon after their marriage to save him from killing her — for she had been unfaithful to him.

"My house is open to you, Flavia," he said again at last. "Will you come if I call you?"

But Flavia did not seem to hear his question. She sat motionless on the ground, scarcely breathing, her whole being crushed by his confession.

Suddenly her courage returned, she stood up and fled from him. Some strength which was not born of herself, for it was contrary to every impulse of body and mind, swept her like a wind through the woods, heedless of rocks and thorns, without fear of losing the path, intent only on reaching a safe refuge.

Camargo saw her fade away in the darkness like a ghost. He started to run after her, following the noises of the dry twigs which broke beneath her feet.

He did not give up his pursuit until he reached the edge of the dam. She was swallowed up then in the deeper obscurity of the buildings. He heard the barking of the dogs, roused by the scent of an intruder, and feared that he might find a shameful death at their teeth.

He turned back to escape them, but before he left the clearing from which he could see the outline of the buildings, he shook his clenched fist toward the house, crying out in his rage:

"Ah, Jesús de Viscarra! You took her from me when she might have been mine! Your dogs shall not save you from me!"

Chapter XIV

THE SON OF SLAVES

"HOW did you find out what you told me once about Victoria?" Mirra asked Pichana.

It was three years after Gracián had left Black Valley. Pichana had been ailing now for some time, she was unable to go out foraging for food and would have starved if Mirra had not visited her. Mirra herself was now fifteen; as she had grown older she had ceased to ramble about and seldom left home except to pay a visit to someone, like Pichana, who needed her charity.

Mirra looked at the old woman, waiting for an answer. Pichana was sitting hunched over in the shade at the side of her hut. Her half shut eyes were watering from the smoke of the corn husk cigar in her mouth.

"How did you know that she was Flavia's daughter?" the girl asked again.

Pichana took the cigar from between her black lips and was about to answer when her alert glance discovered fifty paces away on the edge of the gorge the figure of a man carrying a rifle.

At that distance he could not possibly have overheard the question, but the old woman trembled as if she feared for her life.

Mirra looked to see what had so distressed her and recognized the man. At the same instant he disappeared again behind the rocks.

"It was Camargo," she said in disgust. "How easy it would be for him to kill us out here in this forsaken place! It would take only a single shot!"

"That's just it!" murmured Pichana, who had been thinking the same thing.

And Mirra could not get her to say another word.

The next day she came again. She decided to question Pichana once more, for she suspected that the old woman knew more about Camargo than she had yet confessed.

She did not find her in her usual place and paused on the threshold before venturing to enter the hut. For many years she had not opened the door, which was always shut and often guarded by a dog. Now she saw from the portal a roof of straw overlaid on woven reeds and held up by a poplar ridge-pole, and some stakes of thick carob wood, supporting thatched walls. In one corner there was a pile of rumpled straw like a rabbit's nest and further over some blackened stones stood guard over a handful of ashes. A corner shelf made of a slab of rock, some dirty rags lying on the floor over which a line of red ants was crawling, and a few whips hanging from the roof completed the furnishings. Was the hovel after all the dwelling of a human being, or was it rather the lair of a wild beast?

The mistress of the establishment was not at home — a sign that her health had improved.

Mirra sat down on the threshold to wait for her.

Above her head a frightened bird chirped and twittered in its nest under the eaves. In front of the hut, where the weeds were running wild, a magnificent *chañar* tree lifted its crown of millions of tiny blossoms, lovely as a dream. Below in the valley the timid partridges whistled to each other. The air was full of the pungent fragrance of pennyroyal.

Mirra looked over the landscape as if she were seeing it for the first time. For her mind was not on these things. It was filled with vague presentiments and memories of strange happenings.

A month ago her father had discharged Lazarus abruptly and without mercy. He had never treated anyone in that way before and she knew he must have had some great provocation for his action.

And Flavia's conduct continued to be an unsolvable riddle to her, though her eyes had been gradually opened to many mysteries.

Victoria had disappeared from the house on the Hill and Flavia had accepted her absence with a resignation which led Mirra to doubt the truth of the revelation which Pichana had once made to her.

She wanted to find out about it all, and if Pichana, as she claimed, could see all things hidden or revealed, she must tell her what it meant and what was going to happen at Black Valley.

Mirra did not believe, of course, that the old woman could really foretell the future, but she was certain that

Pichana had seen Lazarus before he left that part of the country on his way no one knew where.

Lazarus had a great respect for the old woman, for once in his childhood she had cured him of a serious illness; had later taken him to live with her when he had been left an orphan; and for some years had shared with him all that she had.

He used to call her "*tiita*" or "aunty" but months would pass without his seeing her, for the old woman was shy and the older she grew, the less she wished to have to do with anyone. She preferred to live by herself or to slink abroad speaking only to such children as did not run away when they saw her coming.

Mirra waited at the door of the hut until she saw Pichana appear from below the river, her rags fluttering in the wind and her dog at her heels.

"Good day, *niña,*" she said as she came up shading her eyes with her scrawny hand.

"Good morning!" answered Mirra, jumping up to let her pass. "You are better. I can see that without your telling me."

"Yes! Pichana got better from just lying still."

"And now you've started out collecting again!"

"What else should Pichana do? When she gives up going around and picking things up, it'll be because she's dead."

"See what I have brought you—some bread, some corn, and a piece of meat that will last you for a long time."

"It'd ought to, seeing Pichana's teeth are gone!"

"And in return for this you must tell me what I want to know."

"How long is it since you have taken to selling your presents, Mirra?"

The girl was silent for a moment. She stood leaning against the *chañar* tree and the wind affectionately tossed a handful of the yellow flowers down on her dark curls.

The old woman went into the cabin, dug a package of tobacco out of a hollow place in the roof which was so low that she could easily reach it, and rolled herself a cigar. Then she came out again and sat down on the threshold, ready to listen.

"Do you know what has become of Lazarus?"

Pichana gazed off in the opposite direction, as if she did not like that topic of conversation, and did not answer. A cloud of smoke enveloped her gray head and her fingers beat a tattoo on her sharp knees.

"You know that he has gone away, don't you?" insisted Mirra.

"Yes, Pichana knows it. . . . Everybody knows it. There are no secrets in these parts."

"Do you know where he went?"

Pichana paid no attention to the question, but turned toward the girl, fixing her knowing eyes upon her.

"Why was the master so unjust to Lazarus?"

Mirra tossed her head haughtily.

"And why should I account to you for my father's actions?"

Then fearing that she had offended her, she added in a gentler tone:

"My father has never been unjust to anybody and least of all to Lazarus."

"That is always the way," said Pichana bitterly, "the rich never think that they are unjust to the poor."

"Doesn't the *niña* know that Lazarus is as good as a son to Pichana?" she continued. "Pichana brought him up. When there were a few goats he tended them. When the lions finished them off, Pichana took him over to Don Jesús to tend his sheep and learn to be an honest man. She has hardly seen him since, for she didn't want to make him ashamed of her. Some folks say Pichana is a witch. That is a lie. But she wants her own way of living; she will not be dependent on anybody; and he wouldn't want Pichana to live this way, perhaps. . . ."

"My father dismissed him," said Mirra, "because he insulted him."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know what he said."

"Was it something about Flavia?"

"I don't know — perhaps."

"Aha!" said the old woman, as if she had found the key to the secret which Lazarus himself had refused to tell her when he stopped to say good-by.

"The master was unjust to Lazarus," she added, "because Flavia has pulled the wool over his eyes."

Mirra made a deprecatory gesture. That could not be true!

"That is the reason!" the old woman insisted.

"I don't understand. . . ."

"You are fifteen years old, *niña* — old enough to hear what Pichana is going to tell you. . . . Once upon a time many years ago a man came to this hut — the same man you saw yesterday standing over there on those rocks!"

"Camargo!"

"Yes — Camargo! He came to ask a favor of Pichana, of her, a poor old woman who has nothing but day and night to call her own. He talked to her about a daughter of his whom he wanted brought up without anybody's knowing who her parents were until he was ready to tell them. The child was a few months old, and he offered to bring her here. He talked on and on about it. He talked all afternoon like a drunken man and his eyes were glittering. He talked so much that at last he let out who was the child's mother. . . ."

"Flavia!"

"That's what he said!"

"But can it be true?"

"Has the *niña* looked at her eyes? Could *niña* Victoria have those eyes if she wasn't her daughter?"

Mirra listened breathlessly without daring to inquire about the points in the story which were still obscure. How was it possible for such an ill-omened relationship to have existed between her father's sister and this man who talked of killing him?

"Pichana couldn't make up her mind," the old woman went on, "to be a party to his schemes. She didn't care

whether or not the story was true. She has lived alone and she wants to die alone without bothering about anybody. When she said so to Don Pablo, he was so mad that Pichana thought he was going to kill her, and said her prayers. But he didn't touch her. As soon as he could speak he told her it would be the end of her if anybody ever found out about his love affair from her. So she kept the secret — until somebody else found it out."

"Who found it out?" asked Mirra.

"Lazarus. And he isn't afraid to talk now that he has gone away from here!"

"Where is he?"

"How should Pichana know?"

There was a moment's silence. Mirra knew that Pichana had not told her everything, but she did not question her further.

"Pichana found out afterwards that Camargo changed his plans and brought Victoria to his own home. She hasn't seen him often since then. Sometimes, like yesterday, he comes around here all by himself with his rifle, looking like a man with wicked thoughts."

Mirra trembled.

"What can he be thinking of?"

The old woman's eyes lit up with a canny light. She drew her bent form over nearer the girl and stretching out her withered, black arms, like two charred sticks, she said:

"Those whom he has a grudge against should look out for him!"

She said no more, but sat down on the stone that served as a threshold and looked furtively around to see if anyone were near by.

Then she spoke again:

"If the *niña* wants to see Pichana killed, Mirra, let her tell someone else what she has just been told."

"No, no! I won't speak of it to anyone!"

"Still," grumbled the old woman, "Pichana has put her life and her peace of mind in the *niña's* hands, for he is sure to find out in some way or other that Pichana has spoken."

Mirra returned home without having lightened her load of anxiety — convinced, rather, that a grave danger was hanging over her father's head.

In the three years that had passed since Camargo had seen Flavia, his love and his hatred had grown stronger and stronger. His hatred no longer found vent in bragging words which could reach Señor de Viscarra's ears. He was silent now, biding his time. And he concealed, too, the love which burned like a malignant fever in his blood, making him at times vehement and furious, ready to commit any crime for the sake of revenge, and then again patient and taciturn, willing to wait for destiny to play into his hand.

For neither he nor Flavia could live this way forever.

If he had known that night what effect his confession was to have upon Flavia, he would have cut out his tongue before he told her his secret.

He felt as if a bloody veil had fallen in front of his eyes and for days at a time he wandered about the places

where they used to meet, certain that if he found her and she fled from him again, he would kill her as he had killed long ago on the bank of the creek the dog that had barked at him as he passed.

As time went on he grew weary of his own violence and ashamed, perhaps, of wandering over the mountains like a vagabond. He shut himself up within the four walls of his house, which now seemed sadder and gloomier than ever, for even Victoria had caught the contagion of his melancholy.

His thoughts were not on her, but he saw more of her than he was used to and her presence brought him no happiness.

Through the day he worked hard on various jobs about the estancia, and was as domineering and grasping as if money were the only thing which mattered to him, whereas his real object was only to hide the impatience with which he waited for night to come.

At twilight he would sit down on the stone bench before the door of his house and drowsily watch the shadows of the trees grow deeper.

Sometimes his daughter sat down at his side, eager to talk with him, feeling instinctively that his strange illness had something to do with her mother. And Camargo, who had formerly avoided the girl, let her stay there as long as she kept quiet, unless he was afraid that she might discover his weakness. At such times he abruptly sent her away.

And every night at midnight during one whole winter he stole his way along hidden paths which no one

else could have followed in the darkness to the spot which had been their trysting-place.

But hope gradually died within him, for Flavia never came.

One day, as suddenly as if he had just awakened from a dream, he spoke to the woman who had brought up his daughter.

"Damiana!"

"Yes, *señor?*"

"Will you marry me?"

The woman laughed softly at the extraordinary question.

"Will you marry me?" he repeated. "I need a mother for my daughter."

"*Señor,*" she said, "it is impossible."

"Why?"

"Victoria already knows her mother."

"What do you mean?"

"She knows her real mother."

Camargo hung his head. So someone had betrayed him!

When he looked up again his fists were clenched. Damiana was frightened.

"How do you know this?"

"One finds things out, Don Pablo."

"Who told you?"

"Nobody. I followed her one day wondering where she was going and I saw her meet Doña Flavia."

"And you say that Flavia is her mother?"

"Yes, *señor.*"

"Who told you that?"

"No one, *señor*."

"It's a lie!"

Damiana stood with her eyes cast on the ground, fearing that she had said too much.

"She . . ." she began and hesitated.

"Who?" asked Camargo fiercely.

"Victoria also believes that Doña Flavia is her mother."

"Did she tell you so?"

"No, *señor* . . . But she did not have to tell me. I knew it without that."

And going back to the idea with which their conversation had begun, she said gently to her master, who listened without meeting her eyes:

"You ought to marry her, Don Pablo."

He turned abruptly, stung by her words.

"Have you spoken to anyone of this?"

"No, *señor*."

"Does anyone know it besides you?"

"I don't think so . . ."

"Well, if they ever find it out from anything you say, I will kill you, do you understand?"

His lips were white and his eyes bloodshot. The woman was afraid for a moment that he would carry out his threat immediately.

"I will kill you!"

"I shan't tell anybody!"

"And — if you must know — I can't marry Flavia!"

She looked up waiting for an explanation.

He walked away a few paces, his footsteps reëchoing through the cold, barren room into which the darkness was creeping, and when they could no longer see each other's faces, he said ruthlessly, speaking more to himself than to her:

"I am already married to another woman — but she will die some day."

He had learned enough. He knew now that in Flavia's heart there was room for no one but her daughter. It made him jealous of the child — jealous of her secret meetings with her mother. He asked Victoria no questions, but took her away one day and placed her in a school in Cordova.

In the atmosphere of the city he felt as if he had been freed from prison. His violence subsided. He was well off, he owned tenant houses there and could afford to live without worrying about his ranch up in the hills. And so he let the months pass by and his wild passions grew calmer.

Flavia accepted her daughter's absence as a punishment sent from Heaven and meant for her good. Surely God, who had ordained her suffering, would reward her patience. But what was the solution to the problem which Camargo's confession had so cruelly raised?

She did not know. She could not know. Whenever she thought about it she felt baffled. What solution could there be for such dreadful things? Well, God was wiser than she and her life was in His hands.

But how slowly the days dragged by in that dismal

valley! She was so lonely, lonelier than a nun in her cell, with Lazarus' bold glances and Mirra's innocent eyes always upon her. Did they know . . . ? How much did they know?

Sometimes she felt an impulse to call the girl to her and say:

"I have done wrong. . . . But I am trying now to do right. And I want you all here in my home to help me!"

For she did not feel sure of the strength of her own will. If Camargo should send her word saying: "I will bring your daughter back to you if you will come with me," she was not certain that she would not hasten to him.

So her wretched soul sinned even in the midst of its penance!

Fortunately for her, Camargo had not returned.

But one day from down in the valley, where she walked now with somewhat more freedom, she saw him riding along the road to his house, accompanied by a peon who was carrying his luggage.

She began to tremble. What would be the end of this?

He had come directly from the city where he had left Victoria. But he made no attempt to see Flavia. He seemed definitely to have forgotten her. Flavia was terrified at his indifference, thinking that she had lost her daughter forever, since she could not ransom her even at the price of submission to his will.

Shortly after his return she received a letter from the

child herself, begging to be allowed to return near her. And her struggle against the old temptation, so often conquered but so often conquering, began once more.

Whenever Amoroso came in from the fields Flavia looked at him questioningly, and sometimes she ventured to ask him as she had once asked Gracián:

"Where have you been?"

"Over by the Hill, *niña.*"

"Did you see anyone over there?"

"Nobody, *niña.*"

"Nobody at all?"

"No."

Later on she grew even bolder.

"Have you see Camargo lately?"

"Yes, *niña,* I saw him to-day."

"What did he say to you?"

"He passed by without looking at me."

Had he definitely given her up? But what more could she expect after having rejected him?

For a long time she waited for a message which never came. Amoroso shook his head whenever he saw her coming out to meet him.

And finally her strength failed her and she surrendered.

It was one night in spring. Her brother was away and everyone in the house — even the dogs — were sleeping their first heavy sleep. Through her window she could see Camargo's Hill bathed in the golden light of the full moon and in the distance against the bright

horizon the jagged profile of the mountain stood out more distinctly even than by day.

A dark spot marked the grove of carob-trees near the house.

Since he would not come to her, she would go to him. She would offer to give herself to him, if he would bring her daughter back to her.

She dressed hurriedly so that she would have no time to repent, and hastened out of doors.

She knew the road and she was not afraid of anything living or dead. Things had lost all value in her eyes. She walked along quickly, clutching furiously at her shawl when its fringe caught on the thorns. She thought once that she heard footsteps following close behind her, but hurried on without turning.

On the hillside the voice of the night wind whispered in her ear — soft and yet menacing. She wrapped her shawl more closely about her and ran, to put it out of her thoughts.

When she came to the gorge through which Amoroso used to pass on his way to Camargo's house, it seemed to her that someone must have run across the fields and reached the spot ahead of her, that someone was waiting there for her — someone who must have come from Black Valley, whose footsteps she had heard following her.

She thought it might be Lazarus, but she was desperate enough not to care whether he saw her or not. She reached the house, anxious only that the dogs should

not hear her so that she could approach a certain window that she knew without making any noise.

The dogs did not waken.

At daybreak she was back again at Black Valley, a great bitterness in her soul. In one night she had destroyed the painful labor of three years. . . .

Such was her destiny. But in spite of all, she felt a confused sort of happiness. She had staked her sheltered peace and lost it, but she had gained her daughter.

As she came out of her room in the morning, she met Lazarus, who passed her with a "Good morning" and an air of having been waiting there to greet her.

His expression convinced her that there was no room for doubt. It was he who had followed her to Camargo's Hill and back. Why was he silent, then, if he knew so much? What was he waiting for?

Just then they heard some people riding into the yard. Don Jesús and the peons were returning from their journey. Their arrival gave Flavia courage to reproach Lazarus.

She felt indifferent to anything he might say against her, for she had lost her fear of the world's condemnation.

She called to him and as he walked toward her, he gave her a gentle, knowing look, as if they had shared some secret. Flavia's hot blood rushed to her cheeks.

"Lazarus!" she cried angrily.

"*Niña?*"

"Lazarus — you spied on me again last night!"

"Why do you say that, *niña?*"

"Am I your sister," she continued with a ferocious scorn — "Am I your wife?"

"But why do you say such things, *niña* Flavia?"

"Because I want to know what right you have to follow me, to watch me. Do you understand?"

Lazarus cringed.

"How do you want me to understand you?"

Her words came like savage blows:

"Were you not in the woods last night?"

"Yes, *niña.*"

"Spying on me?"

"*Niña!* What an idea!"

"Oh! You merely saw me go out in the night and you followed me just so that I wouldn't get lost?"

"No, *niña,* no!"

"Perhaps you were afraid that the dogs might attack me?"

"The dogs are your own and they know you."

"Then why were you there?"

"I don't know! I saw you leave, that's true. I felt worried about you and I wanted to accompany you from a distance. I didn't know . . ."

"What didn't you know?"

"I didn't know that it would displease you."

"How innocent you are!" cried Flavia with biting scorn. Lazarus shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, you sly *gaucho!*"

"Why do you want to insult me, *niña?*"

"What did you see?"

"Nothing."

"How far did you go?"

Lazarus stammered for a moment; but it was no time for half-confessions, and he wanted to show Flavia how powerful a weapon he held against her.

"I went to the end of the salt lick — near the house."

"Camargo's house?"

"Yes, *niña*."

"And you saw me go there?"

"Yes, *niña*."

"What else? Go on, tell me. It is my own secret and I command you to tell me."

"I saw you tap on the window and go in," murmured the peasant in a dull, sad voice.

"You wretch, you wretch! Am I your sweetheart, that you should dog my steps?"

"If you had been my sweetheart, I would have killed him! And then I would have killed you!"

"Oh, how can I bear it?"

"Miss Flavia!"

"What is it?"

"You have made me speak. I would have kept still. I could have lived a hundred years with this secret. I have kept it for six years and I could have kept it forever — as long as I lived — but you have made me speak."

"Are you drunk, Lazarus?"

"I never drink."

"Then why are you speaking to me in this tone?"

"You made me speak — and I don't think I am

insulting you when I tell you that I love you."

Flavia turned pale with anger. The words refused to form on her trembling lips. They were both silent.

"You must leave this place, Lazarus," she said at last.

"Where am I to go?"

"This very day you must ask your master to settle your account."

"You mean I must leave Black Valley for good?"

"Yes. You cannot stay here another hour after what you have dared to say."

Lazarus smiled slightly and Flavia felt herself blinded by shame and wrath. The peasant spoke again:

"I had good reason for believing as I did. . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"You see, *niña,* you force me to speak!"

"Go on, say what you have to say. Let me see to the bottom of your thoughts. God in Heaven! To think it should have come to this!"

As she spoke she just caught Lazarus' half murmured words:

"Why is *his* love any better than mine?"

"So that is what you thought?"

"Yes, *niña,* and I had a right to. He is not your husband — he never can be."

"How do you know?"

"I know only what you yourself know — that he is married, while I — I am free, Miss Flavia, and I would not be wronging anyone."

"Miserable dog! He is at least of my own race!"

The words which he had dreaded to hear struck Laz-

arus like a lash. For the first time he looked steadily at this woman, her equal in his fierce passion.

"Your race!" he said contemptuously.

"Yes! My race! And no humiliation with him could be so great as if I stooped to you, the son of slaves! He . . . you might as well know everything . . . is the father of my child, and I love him . . . I have always loved him."

"I know that, too," muttered Lazarus turning to walk away, "I know all about it — and before long . . ."

"Go on!"

"Before long, Miss Flavia, if you send me away in this fashion, insulted and desperate . . ."

"What then?"

"Everybody will know about it!"

"Oh! Is that a threat? Very well, go on and tell them. I would rather have the whole world know of it than give myself to you."

She ran to her room, slammed the door, and fell on her knees beside her bed.

"God in Heaven! To what depths have I come!"

Lazarus walked away as softly and deliberately as ever, but Flavia's insulting words burned in his soul.

Hearing the door close so violently, Señor de Viscarra came up and rapped on it with the end of his riding whip.

Flavia bade him enter. Then she told him briefly that Lazarus had made advances to her.

Don Jesús did not wait to hear more. He started out

in search of the man who had dared to show disrespect to his family honor. He found him in the courtyard and without a word struck him across the cheek with his whip.

Lazarus' hand moved quickly toward the knife which he wore in his belt. But before he could attack his assailant, a terrible thought had flashed across his mind. Why should he kill him now? He had a greater insult to avenge. His blood, his race, the long line of patient, submissive men from which he had sprung, had been wronged by a woman.

He would make her pay dearly for it. What if he should kill the master of Black Valley under such circumstances that suspicion would rest on her lover?

He had waited so long for the fulfillment of his love. Now he had been thwarted in that. Could he not wait as patiently for his revenge? Could he not wait until he could choose the weapon and the hour which would best serve his purpose?

The idea flashed through his mind, lighting up his whole life, his past and his future. Then it was gone. He hung his head, swallowed the insult, and left Black Valley.

Chapter XV

AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES

BUT Lazarus never carried out his plan. One night when the wind was roaring in the ravine near Lake Brava, Pichana lay awake in her storm-shaken hut on the heap of straw that formed her bed.

She was thinking about Lazarus when suddenly she heard someone knock roughly on her door.

"Let me in! It's Lazarus!"

She took away the stake which she had propped against the door and he entered — a darker shadow among the other shadows in the hut. The little dog in the corner began to bark, but his mistress silenced him with a word. And without lighting a light — for she possessed neither lamp nor candle — she sat down and waited to hear what he had to say.

"Have you anything to eat?"

"Yes."

From the corner-shelf she took a large piece of dry bread and gave it to him.

"This comes from Black Valley," he said, recognizing the smell and shape of the loaf. And he began to eat.

As he ate, the old woman spoke to him of her worries and fears. For more than a month she had been

living in dread that something terrible was about to happen, that she was dwelling in the midst of death and crime.

"It is all the doings of a woman!" Lazarus said.

"You mean Flavia?"

"Yes. She and her brother's pride are to blame for it all."

He ate for a time in silence. Then he spoke again.

"*Tiita,* did you know my father and mother?"

"Yes, Lazarus."

"Were they slaves?"

"No."

"And my grandparents — did you know them?"

"Yes. They were freemen, too."

"Then what right had she to call me the son of slaves?"

"What difference does it make to you what she says?"

"That's the question," he responded, and there was a long silence. The little dog began to bark again and Pichana patted his head with her bony hand to quiet him. In the darkness of the cabin Lazarus' words sounded sinister and ominous.

"Do you know, *tiita,* whether Don Jesús has come back?"

"They say he is coming to-morrow; but . . . why do you want to know?"

"I have to settle my account with him."

"Are you going to his house?"

"No, I'll meet him on the road. That's why I came down from the mountains. I've been waiting for a

week in the Lions' Caves, but to-night I had to come out to get something to eat."

"So you're going to try to meet him?" asked the old woman meaningly.

"That's what I've come for."

"Lazarus, don't do it!"

"Why not? Oh! I know what you are thinking about me . . . !"

"I am only thinking the truth — that you have come back to get your revenge."

Lazarus laughed his soft, mirthless laugh which scarcely changed the bitter expression of his face. But Pichana, who could not see him distinctly in the darkness, felt reassured.

"Do you think, *tiita,* that I hold a grudge against him for what he did to me?"

"If you didn't, you wouldn't be living down in the caves. You would have gone to his house to see him."

"No, I wouldn't, for he hasn't been home, and I don't want to have anything to do with that woman."

"Well, if that is so, Lazarus — may God bless you!"

Lazarus had had enough. He rose and kissed the old woman's hand. She took the stake away from the door and he went out. The wind rumbled through the hollow of the rocks and above this low sound one could hear now and then that unearthly roar which so terrified the simple people of the neighborhood.

Lazarus started to run and his poncho spread out behind him like the wing of a great bird. Then the old

woman saw that he was carrying a rifle. Its barrel glistened in the starlight.

Daybreak found the peasant hiding in the caves, waiting for the hour to come when he could meet Señor de Viscarra at the crossroads where the highway met the path that led along Pichana's precipice.

Would fate be kind to him and arrange their meeting so that there would be no witnesses?

It was evening before Don Jesús de Viscarra reached the banks of the river on his way back from town.

He had been delayed by business at the last minute and was much later than he had expected to be. Night was falling just as he reached the most solitary and dangerous part of the road. Amoroso, who had gone to Cosquín to fetch his luggage, was probably already at home, for he had quite outdistanced him.

Don Jesús rode along at his usual deliberate pace. Like all country people he knew how to conserve his horse's strength, and he did not want to show how impatient he was to reach home.

Mirra had succeeded lately in making him a little cautious by warning him against the two men who were now his enemies. And he had good reason to suspect Camargo's ill will. He feared him more than Lazarus, for he had just had an unpleasant encounter with him.

The day before he had met him on one of the steep, narrow streets of the town. He passed by as usual, but was immediately aware that Camargo was following him.

The street was deserted and the master of Black Valley stopped and waited.

"Jesús de Viscarra!" cried Camargo stepping in front of him.

Don Jesús paid no attention to his rudeness, but answered with his unalterable composure:

"I hear you, Pablo!"

"At last the time has come for you to give me your hand."

"I am always ready to give my hand to anyone who asks for it in friendship."

"I am not speaking to you of friendship. I do not want your friendship. But you will have to give me your hand publicly — not as my friend, but as my brother — and whether you like it or not!"

"Why do you speak to me, Pablo Camargo, if it is only to quarrel with me?"

"To tell you that I am going to marry your sister!"

The words were like a blow to the master of Black Valley.

Could it be possible that there had been an understanding between his sister and his enemy and that that wretched piece of paper on which she herself had recognized Camargo's handwriting, had told the truth? What other reason could she have had for pardoning the insult?

And now here was her lover telling him that in spite of everything he was going to enter his household!

"I am going to marry her, Jesús de Viscarra!"

"She is free, Pablo, and can do as she likes," he answered coldly.

"So you have changed your mind, have you?"

"No. Time has passed and I am no longer her guardian."

"And if you were?"

"Why should we speak of the impossible?"

"I will tell you what you would do. You would again decide against me."

"Yes, that is true."

"Is that the way you offer me your friendship?"

"I do not wish to be your enemy, Pablo, but neither do I wish to be your brother. It is your own fault — the fault of those wild habits of yours, which will ruin the life of any woman who bears your name."

Señor de Viscarra watched the scowl of hatred deepen on his enemy's forehead. He thought for a moment he would attack him then and there, but he did not.

Camargo's strong hand twitched as he seized his bridle and without another word he wheeled around, gave spurs to his horse, and dashed off at a gallop on the road that led toward the mountains.

Don Jesús watched him until he was out of sight, but he was not thinking of him. He was thinking of his sister, who, if all these things were true, was about to cause him one of the great sorrows of his life. He tried to believe that she would not prove unworthy of their proud heritage, and he deliberately gave his attention again to the business affairs which kept him in town one day longer.

As he was at last starting back toward Black Valley, a messenger overtook him and gave him a letter informing him that the law-suit had been decided in his favor in the Court of Appeals. He realized at once that the notice must have already reached Camargo's Hill. And he feared that this might be the last drop which would make the hatred in his enemy's heart overflow.

But he could not help it.

When he reached the river the sun had already disappeared behind the mountains. But the silver edges of the pile of slate-colored clouds on the horizon showed him that its great eye was still looking out upon the world.

The air had grown cool and the birds had stopped singing.

"I can still reach home before night sets in," Don Jesús said to himself, as he paused in midstream to let his horse drink.

He began to ascend the steep slope near Pichana's cabin. A projecting rock prevented him from seeing the figure of the old woman crouching near the side of the road by which he had to pass, spying upon Lazarus, who was hiding in the bushes near by.

Lazarus did not see her, either. His eyes were fixed on this man who was riding forward to his death. He hardened his heart. Why should he pardon him? Not even his blood would wash away the scar on his cheek where the whip had struck him.

Suddenly something unforeseen happened. On the

path in front of him, between him and the approaching rider, rose the grim figure of Pablo Camargo, on foot — his gun in his hand.

"Jesús de Viscarra!" he shouted. "I can settle our quarrel better than your judges!"

The master of Black Valley looked at Camargo and crossed himself. He knew that it meant death. An instant later the report of a shot awoke the echoes in the ravines which were peacefully sleeping through the calm night.

Pichana screamed as she saw Señor de Viscarra fall, and Lazarus disappeared among the bushes. His vengeance had been accomplished by another's hand. His only thought now was to put himself out of reach of the arm of the law, so that its whole weight might fall on the head of Camargo.

Camargo, too, had started to run, when he heard the scream and turning his head saw the old woman standing in the middle of the road. He ran toward her, determined to annihilate this unexpected witness, who could bear testimony against him.

Pichana realized her danger and was filled with terror.

The path ran along the steep edge of the precipice, but she knew its every turn. She jumped up and started to run, but Camargo was too quick for her. He forced her to the very edge of the rocky wall on which a clump of *carquejas* hid the abyss below.

Pichana's scrawny legs were agile and she might still

have escaped, had he not caught her by the shawl, which she had wrapped around her, and with a single shove pushed her over the precipice.

"Damned old hag!"

She gave a shriek and fell straight downward. Her shawl flew open, loosened by the wind.

"She looks like a bat," said Camargo to himself, as he stood watching. "There! That's the bottom! She must be dead . . . as well as he! A fine day's work!"

He walked back a few steps, looked at that other form lying motionless on the white path under the peaceful evening sky, and then disappeared among the trees.

Some hours passed before Mirra, worried by her father's tardiness, sent Amoroso and a peon out to meet him.

It was already dark, but the night was very clear. There was no clouds and the stars in the sky looked like red hot coals.

In the vast silence the young girl's heart whispered sad, incomprehensible things to her.

She felt strangely alarmed and called all the household together — Tránsito, Pastora, and Flavia . . . even Flavia! — and in her father's spacious bedroom, at the foot of his empty bed, in front of an image of the suffering Savior, she began to pray aloud.

Then, as her anxiety increased, she clasped her hands and recited the Trisagion, that prayer so full of anguish, used only in hours of great tribulation and great adversity, when the earth trembles. . .

And the voice of the girl imploring God's help and His justice seemed to fill the night.

"Holy God! Holy and Mighty! Holy and Immortal!"

She stopped suddenly. They all looked at her. She stood up and at that very instant the dogs began to bark.

"Open the door!" she said, and taking the lamp, she held it up to light the way for those who were coming in. Amoroso entered — his hat in his hand — and behind him two peons carrying her father's motionless form.

She did not make a single gesture of foolish grief. She drew near him, looked intently at his pale face as he lay there on the blanket with his eyes closed, and asked the men who were carrying him:

"Is he dead?"

"No, *niña.*"

She turned down the bed and directed the work of laying him upon it so gently that he would not suffer.

He opened his eyes and smiled as he saw her.

"Papa!" she cried, bursting into tears.

He smiled again and moved his lips, but they could not catch his words.

Mirra bent over him and heard what he was saying.

"My dear little girl! Let no one in this house put the law on the trail of my murderer."

He motioned for all of them to go out, and when he was alone with Mirra, he tried to speak again.

"Papa, do not think about that. . . ."

"Yes, my dear. I must think about it, for I am go-

ing to die. . . . I forgive him and I want everyone here to forgive him as I do."

And Mirra cried in her anger and grief:

"Who was it, papa? Lazarus?"

"No! No! It was not Lazarus!"

"Who, then?"

Señor de Viscarra shut his tired eyes and did not answer.

"Who was it?" she asked again, holding her ear nearer to catch the name of the assassin. But she heard only:

"Our Father, who art in heaven . . . forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive . . ."

"Oh, papa!" she cried. "I will forgive him, too! I will forgive him, too!"

He realized that she had joined him in his prayer and opening his eyes again, smiled at her.

He died just as dawn was beginning to edge the mountain tops with rose.

All night long Flavia had remained huddled in one corner of the corridor, gazing off into the unfathomable blackness of the Valley. She left it to the other women who were less distraught than she, to get the various medicaments which they vainly applied to the wounded man.

And during those interminable hours she heard as in a nightmare the constant barking of dogs in the distance.

At dawn the priest, whom they had summoned from Cosquín to attend the dying man, left the house. Soon

afterward they saw him returning, looking very sad.

On the road near the house he had found Pichana's body, cold in death. She had crawled all the long way from the gorge, hoping to reach Black Valley alive, in order to tell what she had seen and to keep the innocent from being punished in place of the guilty.

But death had sealed her lips.

When Flavia finally entered the room where they were keeping watch over her brother, Mirra, who sat weeping at his feet, raised her head and looked at her. Her glance sent a chill to Flavia's heart.

"Did he tell you how it happened?"

"No."

"Didn't he say who did it?"

"No!"

"Was it perhaps Lazarus?"

"No!"

Flavia covered her face with her hands, overcome with horror. Mirra said nothing more. She wished that her lips might have been sealed — sealed like those of her father, which God had closed forever.

Chapter XVI

WAITING

MIRRA watched the sad days flow by in an endless stream. She made no attempt to discover or punish her father's murderer and the police could not take action against either of the men upon whom suspicion fell. And as time went on the whole affair was forgotten.

Camargo, though he felt confident of impunity, had taken his daughter and gone to live in Cosquín. The quiet voice of his conscience protested within him, and in order to still it, he began to associate with the town drunkards who spent their time loitering about the zinc-covered counters in the saloons.

One day, as he was drinking and treating the other peasants around him to glasses of gin and *caña*, one of the well-to-do men of the town entered.

He was looking for some peon who might want to earn a dollar a day and his board, whitewashing a house.

There were plenty in the crowd who were out of work, but no one took up his offer.

"What's the matter? Don't you want a job?"

"I can't take it, *señor*. I have to sow a little corn this week."

"How about you?"

"I'm breaking in a savage mule and I can't leave it. If it wasn't for that . . ."

"Perhaps *he* will," said someone pointing to a ragged fellow, who looked as if he badly needed work.

He stood with a glass of gin in his hand, leaning on his elbows against the long bar, whose surface was stained with red rings where the wine glasses had stood.

"Here, you! Here's a job where you can earn your living!"

The man turned around and answered meekly:

"I would be glad to do your work, *señor* . . ."

"All right, then . . ."

"But as I was about to say . . . Something is the matter with me, for as soon as I climb a ladder I get so dizzy that my feet go out from under me."

During this conversation Camargo had been sitting in one corner of the place, his head sunk on his breast. Suddenly he stood up and offered to undertake the unpopular job himself.

"I will whitewash it for you!"

His hands trembled slightly as he spoke, but he held himself erect and firm. The man looked at him in astonishment.

"What? You, Camargo?"

"Yes, I. Why not?"

"Why, . . . no reason, of course, . . . but . . ."

"If there is no reason why I shouldn't do it, I will do it."

The other man shrugged his shoulders and the two

left the saloon together. And that day the owner of Camargo's Hill was seen whitewashing a wall like any peon working for his daily wage.

And the townspeople began to say that his mind was affected.

But it was Flavia who suffered most from the tragedy which had entered their lives.

Depraved and guilty as he was, she loved him still, as she had loved him on those dreadful nights when she waited for him in the solitude of the mountains, and waited in vain.

She did not seek him out. She avoided him, rather, for she felt that she could not go to him without becoming stained with the blood of her brother, whose passing she had not dared to watch.

But was it true that he was indeed the murderer? No man living could swear to it! Death had silenced the only witness who would have had the right to say "This man killed him!"

And what of Lazarus?

With all her heart Flavia wished that it were possible to put the blame on the overseer's head, but she remembered how Mirra, that morning by her father's bedside, had said "No" in answer to her question.

The girl's pitying eyes haunted Flavia and she would have liked to hide herself away from the sight of them forever.

How much did Mirra know? she asked herself. What had her dying father told her?

But Mirra said nothing to solve the mystery that tortured her so.

The solitary figure of the girl in her black dress was a constant accusation against her. Mirra had taken over the management of the household and Flavia spent most of the hours in the seclusion of her own room.

For some months she had not allowed herself to think much of her daughter, but one day she was seized with an overwhelming desire to see her. She knew that Victoria was in Cosquín. So she left Black Valley and went to live in the town, glad to be away from Mirra's eyes and from the devastating memories of the place.

There was a government school in Cosquín and Flavia succeeded in getting an appointment as teacher there. This gave her a plausible excuse for remaining near her daughter, but left her as much apart from Camargo as if she had been in another world. She wanted to forget him entirely.

Mirra, for her part, was trying to plan her life in such a way as to carry out her father's wishes. Young as she was, she had learned to discipline her desires. And although she might have gone to live in the city, she decided to remain in this remote corner of the mountains which had always been her home.

After Flavia went away she invited the wife of her father's brother, who had been left a widow, to come and live with her. This aunt brought with her a large family of children, and Mirra was very happy with them.

She decided to open up a little school.

Over the door of her father's bedroom she painted carefully the words of the Gospel: "Suffer the little children to come unto Me." And here she held her classes, teaching all the young people of the neighborhood, who had been growing up without any instruction whatever.

All the members of the household and all the people in the Valley and on the mountains admired the energy with which she conceived and carried out her plans, for such tenacity of purpose is unusual among those weak-willed folk. And seeing her always calm and serene, they said that the spirit of her father had descended upon her.

No one guessed how sad she really was.

The days when she used to run about the mountains like a little wild goat, without a fear in the world, seemed now very far away.

Now whenever she went to mass — and she had to start before daybreak in winter to reach the town in time — whenever she passed the spot where her father had met his death, a chill ran through her blood and she set her teeth.

Out of respect for the dead the peasants had set up a wooden cross beside the road and someone had nailed a bit of crape to it.

Touched by the pious tribute, Mirra always looked for the cross and watched the black band as it fluttered in the wind. The sun soon faded it, but still it hung there, a symbol of prayer.

One morning she noticed that the cross was bare. The crape had rotted away in the sun and the rain.

Would time obliterate her sorrow, too?

Mirra dismounted, picked some wild flowers, and twined them about the arms of the cross. And every Sunday as she passed, she replaced them with fresh blossoms.

It had been a dry summer. The corn was destroyed by the locusts and the fields turned slate-color under the implacable rays of the sun.

The clouds in the west were purple at sunset and hung in the sky like great bands of color until it was quite dark.

"That's a sign of drought," said Tránsito, who was something of a weather prophet.

In spite of her years, the vigorous old woman still rode to Cosquín with Mirra on Sundays and they were now on their way back to Black Valley.

The hillside hummed with the singing of the locusts. The woods through which they passed were a tangled mass of low, thorny shrubs which grew out over the path. Here and there a tall, hairy tree had cleft the rocks with its mighty roots. The grass in the meadows had been burned brown by the sun. There were almost no flowers because of the extreme drought, so there were fewer bees buzzing about than in other years and no butterflies to give fleeting kisses to the broom-weed.

"Have you ever heard anything from Gracián?" Tránsito asked.

Mirra started, as if she had read her thoughts. She

shook her head in answer. After they had gone on a little further, she said:

"It is about two months since I wrote him of papa's death. . . ."

"And didn't he answer you?"

"No!"

The old woman sighed. She let her horse walk slowly along, carefully picking his way on the slippery path. Then she finished speaking what was in her mind.

"I certainly liked that boy. And I used to hope he would marry you."

Mirra gave her shoulders an indifferent little shrug, and as soon as they reached a piece of road where it was safe to ride faster, she whipped up her horse and went on ahead alone.

As they were passing along the edge of Pichana's gorge, near the wooden cross, a peon coming from Cosquín overtook them and handed Mirra a letter.

She saw that the address was in Gracián's handwriting, but she did not open it. She did not want anyone to know how disappointed she would be if its contents were other than she hoped to find them.

She did not even say from whom the letter was, but waited until siesta time when she would be able to read it alone.

As soon as lunch was over, she escaped from her aunt and cousins and ran down to the dam, to the place in the grove where she and Gracián had passed so many hours together.

One of the dogs, which always accompanied her on her walks, followed after her.

Under the arching trees a strange, sweet feeling came over her. Oh, Gracián, Gracián, why are you so far away?

She sat down on the stone wall beneath the whispering poplars, the dog curled up at her feet.

She did not immediately open the letter. She wanted to enjoy the pleasure of anticipation as long as she could. It was so intense that it almost moved her to tears. What words would Gracián find to bring her comfort?

She paused again before she broke the seal. One moment more! It was so peaceful there! The sky clear and bright with sunshine, the air full of little noises which made her long for him — the breeze rustling the foliage of the poplars, the doves cooing in the thickets, the little green grasshoppers singing among the weeds, and from time to time the noise of a frog, dropping like a stone into the clear, cool water of the pond!

A distant report — the blast from some near-by quarries — rudely awakened the echoes of the Valley. The dog rose to his feet trembling, his ears pricked up, his nose to the wind.

Mirra tore open the letter and read greedily.

It was written in a somewhat formal style, but it expressed clearly the lad's sincere sympathy. Mirra's letter had been inexplicably long in reaching him.

"I do not know what to say to you, Mirra," he wrote in conclusion. "I don't know whether anything I can

say will be of any comfort to you. Better than any words would be the feeling of your hand in mine. I want to see you, to show you that whatever else may change, I am still the same. Good-by, Mirra. I am coming soon to make you a long visit."

All Mirra's resentment vanished like a cloud before the sun. She told no one of his promise, keeping the happy secret to herself, out of a certain feeling of reserve. And every morning she rose with the hope that that day Gracián might arrive.

She learned one day that Victoria had come back to the Hill and was staying for a short time in the house with the woman who had been her nurse.

Victoria no longer rode out on solitary excursions over the fields, as she had formerly done. She and Mirra had small chance of meeting each other out of doors. And yet Mirra wanted to meet her. For some time she had cherished the plan of going to Camargo's daughter and offering her her hand in friendship.

She was sure that her father in heaven would look down and bless her in the deed, happy that she, too, had learned to forgive.

Without consulting anyone — for she was her own mistress and could do as she pleased — she resolved one morning to go in search of her enemy.

She did not go across the fields, but through the gorge where she and Gracián had often gathered "*chorritos*" and where she could not be seen.

She crossed the orchard and followed along the stone wall. At every step she frightened away the little

field rabbits, timid as rats, but full of curiosity and as elusive as shadows.

She jumped over the wall at the very spot where she had overheard Flavia saying to her daughter: "Some day Gracián will forget Mirra and be your friend."

Why did she suddenly feel that her aunt might have told the truth?

She was on her way to try to win Victoria's friendship. She had only the kindliest feeling for her. Yet deep in her heart she knew that she could forgive her everything, except the loss of Gracián's affection.

She was ashamed of this unworthy reservation. Why should she fear that he would forget her? He was coming soon! But . . . would he come? Would he really come?

She reached the salt lick and entered the narrow pass through which Amoroso used to carry Flavia's messages to Camargo.

The air below was heavy with a silence broken only by the droning of the flies. Above in the sun-bathed fields, in the tops of the trees growing along the edge of the gorge, thousands of wild birds were weaving a symphony in which the leading motif was the golden flute-like song of the thrushes.

The hill vibrated with the singsong of the cicadas. It was pleasant to walk along the shady ravine and listen to the distant bird music, under one's feet a carpet of sand, washed down by the rains, and round about the perfume of the *matorrales,* which were not yet in blossom.

At one place the pass became so narrow that it was scarcely more than a cowpath, crossed by the giant roots of trees and lined on either side with thickets and with patches of wild berry bushes here and there.

Mirra picked her way carefully to avoid the thorns. Sometimes the path forked and unless one were very sure of one's way it was easy to start up a blind trail.

When she reached the bottom of the slope on which Camargo's house stood, a rude stairway dug out of the earth made the ascent easier. Mirra climbed to the top and looked around to see if anyone were about.

Nobody! A hundred yards away stood the house, surrounded by the deserted huts of the peons. The only living thing in sight was a lean old horse which had sought refuge in the shade of a tree from the flies that were stinging his bony rump and sore back. He stood there with his tired, sad eyes closed, as if he were waiting for death to come and make an end of him.

Mirra started down the path leading to the patio, but stopped as soon as she became aware that the dogs had caught scent of her and were announcing her arrival.

Victoria herself came out of the house to greet her visitor. At sight of her Mirra's heart fell.

It was years since they had met and she found Victoria changed and grown very beautiful.

She was blond, but the sun had given her fair skin the healthy color of the mountaineer. Her eyes were bright, restless, eager. Her nervous brows met above them in a straight line curving downward at the ends.

Her impulsive, passionate soul flashed out in every glance.

About her forehead fell her rebellious hair in careless curls. Her small mouth and delicately formed nose gave her face a rare and piquant beauty.

"You, Mirra!"

"Yes, I!"

The two girls measured each other silently for a moment and Mirra realized that she had come on a vain errand. Nevertheless, she held out her hand, saying:

"I have come to see you, Victoria, because I don't want to be your enemy any longer."

Victoria ignored the outstretched hand. She said nothing. A frown came over her forehead and her eyes flashed.

"Give me your hand, Victoria, and let us be friends!"

Camargo's daughter quickly thrust her hands behind her back.

"I cannot shake hands with you!"

"Why not?"

"Because you have spoken ill of my father!"

"I?"

"Yes!"

She spoke the word as if she would spit it in her face.

"Never!" protested Mirra.

"Yes, you have! You have accused him of having killed your father!"

"Never!" repeated Mirra, looking at the other girl in such a way that for a moment she trembled and was silent.

"And you have driven my mother from your house!"

"No! That is not true!"

"And now you come to see the daughter of the man whom you have accused of murdering your father!"

"Oh!" said Mirra, stepping forward. "Don't you know, Victoria, that before father died he forgave his murderer and told us all that we must forgive him, too. And I have done so, Victoria. I have done so. I have made no accusations and borne no ill feelings toward anyone. That is why I have come to see you!"

She made an effort to control the tears which were filling her eyes. Victoria, seeing that one of the dogs was about to spring at Mirra, caught him by the collar and held him back.

"Go away! I don't want to be friends with you. And if you ever come again I will drive you away with my dogs, as you drove my mother from your home!"

Mirra did not answer, but retraced her steps with growing indignation. For a long time she heard the dogs barking behind her and felt the bitterness of the hatred which dwelt in that house.

She did not tell anyone what had occurred, but kept her thoughts to herself and waited until Gracián should come.

Toward the end of January the *piquillines* grew ripe. The squatty little trees on the hillside where the sun beat upon the fruit looked as if they were hung with rubies. But in the shade of the valleys, where the land was richer, the fruit was large and purple and more delicious. It was this that the children liked best.

Mirra had hoped that Gracián would arrive before it was time to gather the fruit. But the harvest passed and still he did not come.

"I want to see you . . . Mirra . . . I am coming soon to make you a long visit."

The words hummed in her ears like bees about a near-by hive. When would he come?

She went to the orchard and sought out the places where they had spent most time together, in order to make her memories more vivid.

Since her father's death, the place had been abandoned and the weeds had gradually grown up and filled it. Out from among them peeped the *santamarías* like little golden stars. In one corner, where they had formerly cultivated vegetables, a wooden plow was rotting away and falling to pieces. She walked over to it and moved it from its place and from under the plowshare where a little moisture had collected, there scurried in all directions the myriads of bugs that had been dwelling there.

There was already a touch of autumn in the air. The first yellow leaves of the willows shone in the sun like little flames and when a bird brushed past them they dropped gently off the tree with the melancholy sound of dying things.

Yet in the solitude of this place Mirra looked toward the future with confidence.

She waited there one night until the stars were out.

The calm night descended like a veil over the valley. The trembling willows filled the air with a gentle mur-

mur. Then there was a deep silence. A *quintové* flew up from a branch in the treetop and left it swaying. Everything else was as motionless as if it were in a painted landscape.

The crickets began to chirp.

"Miss Mirra! Miss Mirra!" called a boy who used to run errands for them. "Here is a letter for you!"

It was from Gracián. Sitting there in the twilight Mirra read that he would not come until spring — or possibly summer, when he could spend his entire vacation at Black Valley.

Chapter XVII

GRACIÁN'S RETURN

MARCH came with its humid mornings and windy afternoons. The meadows were all in flower and would soon go to seed. Flocks of young doves sunned themselves in the tops of the dead trees.

Mirra's school had opened this autumn with more pupils than the year before, and the attendance increased as the winter advanced. The children came from all directions, thinly dressed and shivering with the cold, their faces livid, their fingers numb, but their eyes bright in anticipation of the cup of warm milk and the piece of bread which Mirra gave them out in the goat-corral when they first arrived and the big plate of stew with more bread which they ate at noon in Tránsito's kitchen.

School days were holidays to them and they would gladly have overcome all sorts of difficulties in order to reach Black Valley.

Those who lived nearest walked to school, usually barefoot, picking their steps carefully and stopping every now and then to pull out thorns which had pierced their feet in spite of their caution. Those who came from a greater distance rode in by twos or threes

on the back of some sorry old nag, some with little earthen pots tied to their saddles, in which they carried home what was left over of their lunch.

"How hungry these innocents do get!" said Tránsito as she filled their outstretched plates from her big ladle.

Among the pupils was a boy considerably older than Mirra.

"What is your name?" she asked him the first day.

"Juan Britos."

"What have you studied?"

"Nothing — yet."

"And what do you want to learn?"

"Everything!" Then he explained the reason for his ambition:

"I want to be a police *comisario*."

The new pupil's arrival caused quite a sensation, for he rode in straddling a gray donkey, his long legs nearly touching the ground; and behind him trotted the donkey's foal, a shaggy, little black creature with a soft nose and great long ears, which ran to its mother every time the rider stopped, and sucked her greedily.

The second week Juan Britos came bringing on his saddle in front of him a fair-haired little girl with blue eyes and rosy cheeks, who looked like some exotic flower among that crowd of dark-skinned children whose faces were even darker than usual from the cold.

The *gringa*, the "foreigner," as they called her, brought with her a book which she wanted to learn to read. It was a book of fortune-telling, well thumbed

by the peasants of the neighborhood, who managed to decipher from it, with some difficulty, the fate of mankind and the outcome of their own poor love affairs.

The child studied industriously, for Juan had said to her: "If you learn to read very quickly, I will give you the little donkey." And she was very eager to find out for herself what the book had to say about her future.

Mirra explained to her that she must not expect from it any superhuman wisdom, but the *gringa,* not at all convinced, guarded her treasure carefully and would not study any other.

Since they were always the first to arrive, in spite of the long distance from which they came, Juan Britos offered one day to milk the goats in the corral and let the *gringa* pass the milk around to the other children.

"You see, I'm going to marry her," he said to Mirra.

"You've certainly chosen early enough," answered Mirra, smiling. "But what does she say?"

"She's willing. When she is old enough we'll have the wedding."

"And her parents — what do they say about it?"

"She hasn't any parents. A woman who came from Cordova looking for some man who was supposed to be working in the quarries brought her along with her. She didn't find the man and she didn't want to take the kid back. So without saying anything to anybody she left her at our house one day and skipped off and that's the last we ever heard of her."

Six months later the girl had already learned to read,

while Juan Britos had not yet succeeded in getting past the third page of the spelling book.

"Well, well! I *am* stupid!" he said, looking at his pretty companion with frank admiration.

Among the goats there was a little chocolate-colored kid with a curly pelt, whose mother had been devoured by a lion one night when she had strayed out on the mountain. A peon had found the kid and carried it back to the estancia where they brought it up by hand.

"If you learn to write by the end of the term," Mirra promised the *gringa,* who drank in her words with her whole soul in her blue eyes, "I will give you the orphan kid."

But toward spring one terribly cold night, the kid escaped from its bed in the kitchen and hearing the bleating of the other goats, it ran out and tried to get into the pen beside them.

All night long, half in a dream, Mirra heard the poor little creature's despairing bleats, like the wail of a lost child.

When the dogs barked, the forlorn little thing would be silent for a time. But as soon as they quieted down one could hear it again, weaker and more pitiful than before.

In the early morning, when Mirra and Juan Britos went out to the corral to do the milking, they found its rigid body, leaning against the palisade, white and glistening with frost.

This life with its quiet pleasures and sorrows filled Mirra's mind and diverted her thoughts a little from

Gracián. But as the time approached when he was to arrive, all her memories of him rushed back to torment her, so deeply had love for him entered her soul!

With an eagerness which no one could understand, she watched the peach-trees in the orchard clothe themselves with blossoms. The weather grew milder and it was a pleasure to see the flocks jumping about and bleating as they were let out of the pen and to see the goats scatter over the hills and come together again in the valleys, like a pile of dry leaves, swept hither and thither by the wind.

Mirra gave orders to the peons to repair the fences and to plow the cornfields before the weeds could start. Often she went out herself to oversee their work.

At this time of the year there were nests in every tree and flowers on every bush and between the rocks one could sometimes find the dry, transparent, discarded skin of a snake.

But Gracián did not return! Time passed and Mirra heard nothing from him until she finally came to believe that he had married or died; she banished from her mind all hope of seeing him again.

It was more than three years after her father's death before she had any news of him. Then a man, who used to know him, came to spend the summer in Cosquín.

"Gracián Palma? Oh yes, he was a medical student, when I knew him — not a very good student, I am afraid. He gave up his profession and went into journalism. He published a book of poems which was not

very successful, but he never became a real bohemian, like so many people of his tastes with some talent but little character, for when his uncle died and left him a fortune, his guardian sent him to Europe."

Mirra, who had never been outside that narrow strip of land between the mountains, tried to imagine how it must feel to travel in those far away, legendary countries.

And again years passed by and brought no further word from him.

In the meantime Gracián had returned to the Argentine. He was of age now and free to manage his own estates. But he had turned from school to travel, from travel to scribbling, forever restless, yet already tired of unproductive change. He found himself dreaming dreams which he failed to carry out, and bringing to reality others which became dust and ashes.

It was an empty life and a tiresome one. If he had stayed at home, he might have married and settled down and perhaps become an inoffensive local poet, dreaming his way through the world. As it was, he was awake, but he had missed the pleasures of a simpler life, squandering his humble talents in his aimless hunger and half-hearted striving.

He wondered if he could ever again find the enthusiasm and affection of his childhood? Where were they?

He thought of Black Valley and in his memory he saw again the face of his little playmate. So many years had passed since he had heard from her! It was his own fault, of course. Where was she now? Had

she ever left that remote corner of the mountains? Was she married?

"I should have married her, myself," he thought and he remembered how during those years at school her love had seemed to hover about him like a beautiful butterfly. To what distant dreamland had it flown?

He saw in his imagination the country about Black Valley, surrounded with all the glamour which grows about the scenes of one's childhood. And he felt an irresistible impulse to visit the place where he had known Mirra, even though she could no longer be his childhood sweetheart and ride with him again through the fields and over the hills.

And one day, driven by the same restlessness that had made him for years a wanderer on the face of the earth, he returned to Cordova.

It was a bright winter morning. At eight o'clock he heard the never-to-be-forgotten clang of the university bell with its dry, slightly cracked tone. He awoke with the same startled sense of being late that had always driven him from his bed in his school days. And through the half-open shutters, on the street which the sun had turned to gold, he saw the students filing by, their books under their arms, engaged in the discussion of some school-boy affairs or hastily reviewing their lessons.

How far away he had grown from the interests of his youth!

He dressed quickly and went out. The warm, vibrant peal of a church bell calling to mass startled him.

It seemed to be ringing just above his head. People of all sorts were answering its summons — tastefully dressed ladies, women of the lower classes in their long, hooded cloaks, young girls in white with poetic blue mantles like that of the Virgin of Lourdes, and a neat little old man with a solemn frock coat and a high silk hat.

He saw the towers of the old colonial Jesuit church being desecrated by a new coat of whitewash. Fortunately the renovators had not yet disfigured the entire façade. He wanted to enter its great nave, so dark and full of echoes, but he was not yet ready to pray.

He walked down University Street to the poorer quarters of the city along the Cañada, streets full of imperishable memories, with their cobbled pavements, their raised flagstone walks with little patches of green grass growing between the cracks, as in an English garden, and their old houses, which did not extend far back from the road, with damp patios full of tubs of plants and innumerable smaller pots of sweet basil and mint.

An old woman muffled in a black shawl was leading a little donkey with its panniers full of Angola gourds, winter cabbages, and other vegetables. She stopped from door to door and offered her wares to her humble customers, who haggled over the prices but were not too particular about the quality of the goods.

Now and then some "fishermen" passed him with pieces of *dorado* hanging from the crotched sticks over their shoulders, monotonously calling out "Fresh Fish!"

although their supply had been brought to Cordova by train from the distant seaports.

How deep an impression every familiar detail made upon him!

An open door without a lintel faintly lighted a gloomy cellar room below the level of the sidewalk. Here on some rough wooden boards were piled the vegetables that were in season. Here the poor people could buy pieces of gourd, and the girls tiny plants of sweet basil and pinks. Some little boys were amusing themselves by teaching "swear-words" to a parrot, which clung to its tin perch and called out "Good morning" and various obscene phrases to the passers-by.

In front of one house stood an oxcart with a load of wood. A lady was standing talking to its owner, a little old man with sandals on his feet, who came from Heaven knows where, and who addressed her very humbly as "Your grace." And further on, following a narrow winding street where the grass was growing between the stones of the pavement, Gracián came upon a group of boys skipping school and engaged in throwing *bolas* and spinning tops on the hard dirt paths.

"Oho! You're playing hooky, too, are you?" they called to another lad who had found the streets more attractive than the school and came up to join them with his books under his arm.

Gracián remembered similar adventures of his own boyhood and would have liked to share their fun.

He passed by a schoolhouse on the same street and

heard from within the sharp voice of the teacher, leading the chorus of the primary class in their spelling lesson:

G – O – A – T — Goat!

The windows were open to the bright Cordovan sunshine and by stretching a little he could catch a glimpse of the touching picture of innocence inside.

A hundred steps farther on was the wall of masonry constructed by the Jesuits in colonial times to support the banks of the Cañada — a deep channel through which a little stream of dirty water was flowing, winding its way among débris and refuse and licking the foundations of some isolated houses that had been built along its edge.

There was no bridge over the stream, but four or five rocks in mid-channel formed a ford. Gracián saw a girl cross over, jumping from stone to stone. He followed in her steps, climbed the narrow stairway that led up the other side of the gorge, where the suburbs really began, and walked down a winding little alley, which now and then led him across the courtyard of a little old house with a thatched roof, like the huts up in the mountains. And he tasted again the flavor of those typical scenes which he had found nowhere else in all his journeyings.

There were the little boys fighting with slingshots along the banks of the stream; there was the somber cactus-hedge growing along the edge of the road; the stray donkey nibbling at it; the old woman wrapped in a shawl, limping along with a basket on her arm which

smelled of warm *bizcochos,* these long, thin cookies that crumble in one's mouth. There, before one of the poor hovels, a girl was singing as she spread her clothes out to dry in the sun; and before another, in the middle of a clay patio, surrounded by tubs full of plants, sat a woman drinking *mate;* while at the next door an old creole shoemaker was vigorously hammering the piece of sole leather which he held on his knees.

Gracián stopped and listened to the girl's song. Her clear, happy voice gave the lie to its melancholy words:

They have told me you are saying
You no longer care for me.
With my heart you have been playing,
While your own heart still was free.
Gone, you keep me dreaming of you
When like you I should forget,
For you taught me how to love you
And alas! I love you yet!

And the whole scene lay flooded with the golden sunshine, under the glorious sky, framed in on the south by the hazy outline of the distant blue mountains.

Ah, Mirra! Where are you, Mirra!

A bugle call rent the clear air and a flock of doves rose in a throng and disappeared among the houses of the city on their way to the belfry. The drums were sounding in the barracks and from the height on which Gracián stood, he could look over the walls and see the soldiers assembling for drill.

He returned to his hotel, his spirit refreshed and his desire to revisit the scene of his childhood's love stronger than ever. Two or three days later he took the train to Cosquín, bound for the enchanted land of Black Valley.

The willows along the river with their saffron-colored foliage passed like shadows before his eyes. He saw the animals in the fields trying to find shelter from the cold, which was settling down on the world like a great winding-sheet.

This was not the summer landscape that he remembered, but he carried all its sunshine in his heart. It was already night when he left the train at Cosquín.

The incomparable golden morning of the next day!

Gracián dressed hurriedly and went out, hardly daring to glance at the faces of the passers-by for fear of being recognized.

Suddenly he heard a voice:

"Aren't you Gracián Palma?"

"Oh . . . It is Flavia!"

She was standing at the door of her school, watching the children. She made him come in, embraced him affectionately, and pelted him with questions. . . .

And he, who had been so eager to visit the remote valley where he had left the soul of his childhood, where the sweetheart of his dreams was perhaps awaiting him — did not reach the end of his journey.

Camargo now lived in Flavia's house — a semi-idiot. He sat in his corner with no expression on his face ex-

cept an occasional flash of hatred when he looked at the woman whose features recalled to his mind those of Jesús de Viscarra.

Flavia and her daughter felt themselves more isolated in Cosquín than if they had been living on the Hill. Some of the blood of the dead man had fallen upon them. They made no effort to defend themselves, but went on their way, uncomplaining, proud, aloof.

They were biding their time — their hearts unchanged!

And so when Gracián arrived he found Victoria thinking of him.

"Some day," her mother had said, "Gracián will grow tired of Mirra and will be your friend." And in her impatience to free her daughter from the hostile solitude in which they lived, Flavia herself threw her into his arms without realizing that her own sad romance of love and abandonment might be repeated in the life of her daughter.

For two months Victoria and Gracián rode out alone together over the mountain roads. The neighbors began to talk, and in the girl's bright eyes sparkled a flame of passion.

They explored every road but one — the one that led down toward the Yuspe river and up the hill where Pichana used to live, behind which Black Valley lay hidden. Gracián never once mentioned the name of the beloved spot, for fear his voice might betray his emotion.

Once, only, Victoria had spoken to him of Mirra.

It was during one of their first rides together and Gracián was intoxicated with the delightful adventure.

They were crossing the rolling plain of Olain on horseback.

In the arid loneliness of the landscape, where there was not a flower nor a green plant to greet the eye, where the wind and the birds were still, and only the cry of the hawk broke the silence, Victoria's beauty seemed more resplendent and alluring than ever.

She was riding ahead, for the path was too narrow for them to go abreast.

Suddenly Gracián said to her:

"Your saddle-girth is loose."

She stopped, backed her horse a few steps and turned around.

"Will you fix it for me?" she asked smiling.

"Yes, gladly."

The hand which he held out to help her alight was cold and trembling.

The defect in the girth was no great matter, but it took Gracián a few moments to fix it. In the meantime they talked.

"I have heard that you used to write poems — is that so?" Victoria asked.

"Yes, years ago. I haven't written any for a long time."

"Did you write a great many for her . . . for Mirra?"

"No . . . not any!"

This was true enough, for he had never thought his scribblings worthy of her.

"I can't believe you, Gracián. Weren't you two in love with each other?"

"No!"

"Weren't you in love with her, then? Weren't you ever in love with her?"

"What a foolish question!" he answered vehemently. "Did you really believe I was?"

"Yes! I thought you had no eyes for anyone but her!"

"How could you think such a thing? She cannot compare with you, Victoria!"

"And . . . would you write poems for me now?"

A thousand years must have gone by since that day. Gracián could pass the spot now and feel no other emotion than a sense of shame when he recalled that there he had denied Mirra.

August was drawing to a close. The cold wind swept down from the mountains. They rode out together less frequently now. Gracián made the inclement weather his excuse.

He wanted to break off this unhappy affair in which he had let himself be involved. But how was he to do it?

He did not go so often to Flavia's house, where the figure of Camargo, confined to his chair, his head hanging, his eyes vacant and shifting, his shaking hands fumbling with some coarse strap or carving the brand

of his ranch on a piece of wood, always made a painful impression upon him.

But in Cosquín it was not easy to find excuses to justify his absence. Flavia's suspicions were sure to be aroused and she would not be long in discovering the full extent of her daughter's unhappiness.

As for Victoria — she knew without his saying a word that he was growing tired of her. And the knowledge made her desperate. She had risked everything — beauty, pride, and honor — for his love and she had lost. What was she to do now?

Sometimes she saw Amoroso, grown old and grotesque, but active still and craftier than ever, watching her as he might have watched a sister who was about to be taken from him, and she trembled with apprehension.

If her mother should say to him some day "You must avenge the wrong that has been done my daughter!" or "You must kill him!" she knew very well that Amoroso would commit murder with a serene and contented conscience.

Victoria was already on the downward path; each step she found easier than the last, and it frightened her to think where it might eventually lead her.

One day when Gracián called, she was not at home. She had gone out to the estancia.

Flavia greeted him as if she had been expecting him and he guessed immediately that the inevitable explanation was coming. He felt himself a coward. But the sadness in Flavia's face was so resigned and so imploring,

that it moved him as much as if it had been his own mother who had called him to her side.

"I want to talk to you, Gracián, alone, with your hand in mine, as we talked together when you were a little boy and came to stay with us in Black Valley. Do you remember?"

Why did she recall those days to him? Was it not the worst possible way to prepare him for what she was about to say? Gracián nodded, and she continued, her voice breaking with emotion.

"You came to Black Valley and from the very first I loved you and promised to be a mother to you. . . . Have you forgotten?"

"No, *señora!*"

"Do you remember where it was that I spoke to you?"

"It was in your room, in front of the window that looked out toward Camargo's Hill, on a sunny morning. . . ."

"Yes, yes! You had just come in from the fields with her . . . with Mirra . . ."

"Yes, yes!"

"And I called you in, for I knew you had been over there where . . . Pablo lived and I asked you . . ."

"I remember it as if it were yesterday," said Gracián, won over instantly by the sweet gentleness of her motherly voice.

"I asked you whether you had seen anyone. You must have been surprised — not so much by my question, perhaps, as by the eagerness with which I spoke."

"Yes, that is true, *señora.*"

"You promised me that day that you would not call me "*señora.*" You were to call me simply '*aunt.*' . . . You told me that you had not seen anyone. Oh, Gracián, you must have forgotten!"

"No, indeed, I have not."

"You cannot know how much your answer meant to me, Gracián. You cannot imagine how I longed to hear about her, about my daughter, from someone who was not her enemy. I suffered so through all those years . . . not knowing her. Later on, darker days entered my life, but then at least we were together and Victoria's love was my comfort. Since then better years have come and I was beginning to think that perhaps I had paid the penalty of my sins and that God would not visit them upon her!"

She seized Gracián's two hands, and looking into his eyes to read his answer before his lips could form it, she asked:

"Have you ever seen anyone more beautiful than she is?"

Gracian thought of Victoria's resplendent beauty, of her eyes, deep and mysterious as the sea. He felt once more the intoxication of her loveliness and replied enthusiastically:

"No! I have traveled the whole world over, Flavia, and I have never found her equal!"

"Not even Mirra?" she asked anxiously.

And for the second time he denied her.

"No, not even Mirra," he said. But his thoughts flew away to the little corner of the world where Mirra lived, and Flavia's voice sounded far away and dream-like in his ears.

"I deserved my punishment, Gracián, but why should Victoria suffer? Against whom has she sinned? You know how lonely her childhood was up there on the Hill without brothers or sisters or friends. You have seen her in this house with her father sick and despised and her mother scorned and avoided. You have come into our home like my son, like her brother. She loves you, and you . . . Gracián . . ."

A bitter sob broke from her lips. She clasped Gracián's hands and raised her eyes, wild with anxiety, to his.

"Oh, Gracián, what have you done to my daughter?"

From the sad reproach in her voice he felt sure that she knew everything. And seeing her there before him, kissing his hands that were wet with her tears and imploring him to restore her daughter's happiness, he felt his misgivings vanish and a new feeling of tenderness spring up in his heart.

"I will be your son!" he cried, kissing her, "and you shall be my mother!"

"Do you mean it? I know you did love her, but now . . ."

"I mean it. I love her and . . ."

"Will you defend her against anything that might destroy her happiness?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Will you marry her, Gracián? Can you defend yourself against your own weak will?"

"I will try!"

"Oh, Gracián! If you should deceive us . . . !"

She broke into tears, leaving her sentence unfinished.

At that moment there was a knock at the door and Amoroso, the only servant in the house, crossed in front of them to answer it. As he passed, he looked at Gracián with eyes like those of a beast who is gentle and amiable with his master's friends.

Chapter XVIII

THE TRAVELLER

THE merry peal of bells rent the air that cool September morning. On two or three Sundays, at the hour of mass, Gracián had walked around the square in front of the church, secretly hoping to see Mirra, but not knowing just what he would do if he should find himself face to face with her.

When she did not arrive among the other worshippers who poured in from all over the countryside, he looked to see if he could recognize the Black Valley brand on any of the horses that were tied to the row of paradise trees in the square or hobbled outside the railing.

Steeds of all sorts were assembled there — little mules sleek and fat in spite of the hard winter and the scarcity of fodder, and pitiful old nags with lusterless eyes and hanging heads, looking as if they were about to expire, but still capable of putting forth enough effort to reach the sierras in a single day.

It was the first time that Mirra had left the Valley since winter set in, but when she saw how fine the weather was that morning, with no threatening clouds and no wind, she had ordered the horses saddled for herself and her cousins.

She was already in the church, when Gracián, taking his usual Sunday walk around the square, discovered Don Jesús, Golden, fitted out with a woman's saddle and looking as well cared for as in the days when its master was alive.

The horse seemed to recognize him, too, and looked at him proudly, the white star glistening on its forehead.

When nobody was looking, Gracián stroked the long, black mane and was pleased to see that Golden accepted the caress as if it came from the hand of a friend.

Conflicting emotions filled the young man's heart. It was dark inside the church. Slipping unnoticed into one of the side chapels reserved for the men and separated from the chancel by a broad pillar, he began to look around to see if he could distinguish Mirra in the dim light of the nave.

He discovered her at last in a corner so far to the front of the church that only her profile was visible from where he sat. She was still in mourning and looked paler and much taller than in the far away days when they were playmates. She was reading from her prayer book and following the service attentively.

When it was time for the Gospel, and she rose to her feet, Gracián involuntarily closed his eyes in order to compare the living reality before him with the image he had kept in his memory.

It seemed only yesterday that he had seen her. His heart was so full of her that lately he had imagined her

just as she was! He was sure now that if she spoke, or prayed aloud, or if she called him by name as she came from mass, her voice would have the old loyal ring of long ago.

How could he have lived so many years without her? What was she thinking of now? In what direction was the course of her life flowing? Whose name did the letters of her book form for her? Did she know yet what it was to be in love?

Eager to see her full face without being noticed, hoping to read in her eyes the answer to some of these questions, he left the church before the *Ave Marias* were said and stood in the doorway, leaning against a pillar of the railing.

The worshippers filed out into the dazzling sunshine. Everyone glanced at the stranger, wondering what had brought him to church. Some young girls were mounting their horses, sometimes two or three of them on the same steed, assisted by their "beaux," and they rode off toward their homes with a great deal of merry laughter. A drove of loose mules, without bridles and without stirrups to their saddles, loaded down with huge packs, obstructed the road. Their owners had come in from the sierras, making the long, tiresome trip in order to sell in town the products of their flocks and of their wives' industry — homespun cloth, saddle blankets, and coarse woolen ponchos — and to supply themselves with provisions and household furnishings which they carried home again on the backs of their beasts.

They came in time "to take advantage of" the mass, but kept well to the back of the church, somewhat abashed to find themselves present at such a ceremony.

Mirra's Golden had strayed out among the mountaineers' mules and Gracián watched a peasant catch it and lead it up to the church door when its mistress appeared.

It was Lazarus!

Pale and indifferent, Mirra passed by the spot where Gracián stood. She gave him no sign of recognition. She did not even look at him. It was as if he did not exist.

"Good morning, *niña,*" said Lazarus, handing her the reins and whip and helping her mount. The girl had complete command of herself on horseback. She waited quietly for her companions to mount and then they all started off at a gallop, leaving a great cloud of dust in the street behind them.

Gracián stood gazing after one of Mirra's little cousins who rode ahead of the rest. She was of the same age as Mirra had been when he first knew her, and she had the same manner.

He was seized with a vast regret. In the one moment that the scene lasted he saw clearly into the depths of his own faithless, disillusioned soul.

What he had loved in Victoria was Mirra, what he had sought in her was Mirra's spirit, Mirra's innocent ways — and his disenchantment was born of the fact that he had not found in her anything of so lasting a charm.

That afternoon he went to Flavia's to say good-by. He felt that he must get away and take time to think over what he should do.

Victoria came up to him and put her hands on his shoulders, looking into his eyes to read what was in his heart. He tried to avoid her glance, like a coward.

"Will you come back, Gracián?"

"Yes."

"Soon?"

"Very soon."

"How soon . . . days . . . or weeks?"

"I don't know," he answered. "A week . . . perhaps two . . . I can't tell. I have been neglecting my affairs and I must look after them."

"Gracián . . . when you come back I shall perhaps have news for you."

"Good news?"

"Or bad! It depends on something beyond my control."

Flavia had gone out and they were all alone. Victoria sat down and gazed down the deserted street toward the *Pan de Azucar* up on the mountain, white as a maiden's breast. Anxious and despondent, she waited for him to urge her to tell him her secret, but he said nothing. His thoughts were far away, his heart cold and indifferent. He longed to be gone.

"Will you write to me, Gracián?"

"Yes. What shall I tell you about?"

"Tell me about yourself. Tell me what you do hour

by hour. Then I shall know at what moment you have begun to forget me and who has replaced me in your thoughts."

In silence they both thought of the same name.

After Gracián left, Victoria grew strangely silent, even with her mother. It was as if she felt a presentiment of misfortune.

Mirra had known for months that Gracián was in Cosquín. It was Lazarus who had first told her the news. He had come back occasionally to Black Valley after Flavia went away and Mirra had received him kindly, for she had no reason to hold anything against him.

"That boy, Gracián, who used to come here, is grown up now and is in town."

Mirra listened to the announcement without any show of interest.

"And he almost never leaves Miss Flavia's house," added the peasant in a low, malicious tone.

Even these words failed to make Mirra change countenance and Lazarus went away disappointed, for he would have liked to stir up trouble between the two women and give Flavia another burden to bear.

Mirra's indifference was only assumed. As soon as the peasant had gone, she ran to the room where she held her classes, where the crucifix hung on which her father had looked as he was dying, and shut herself up there to collect her thoughts.

So her heart was not, as she had thought, free — completely free? If the knowledge that Gracián was liv-

ing — or practically that — in Flavia's house, distressed her so, it must be because she was still fond of him.

She had pardoned his absence and his neglect. She had pardoned his failure to keep his word and return to Black Valley. Would she also have to pardon his faithlessness?

She felt herself torn once more by the old conflict, and into her memory flashed scenes which she thought she had entirely forgotten. She saw again the spot where her childish heart had first learned what sorrow meant, the corner of the orchard where she had heard Flavia saying "Some day Gracián will be tired of her and will be *your* friend."

She remembered all that had happened that night; how she had told Gracián that he would forget her; how he had kissed her and denied it; and how at last she had made him promise that he would never let Victoria take her place in his heart.

"What an intricate web fate weaves!" she thought. So many years had passed without news of him that she had believed he would never return and had persuaded herself that she had forgotten him. And now suddenly they brought her word that he was living only a half day's journey from the Valley — that he was being received as a friend in Victoria's house, and the knowledge tortured her like the reopening of an old wound in her flesh.

Why had he returned, if it was only to wrong her?

She wept softly for a time, kneeling down before the

little table which was standing where her father's bed had stood, and at last she rose comforted, her painful thoughts banished and her heart again at peace.

Later she heard several times that Gracián was staying in Cosquín and that he had been seen everywhere with Victoria. Then, since she did not seem to be interested, they ceased to speak to her about him.

And when after many weeks she saw him that morning at church, she could pass by him without even looking at him and feel that he no longer had any part in her life.

In the middle of the vacation the following summer Juan Britos came riding into Black Valley one day.

"Some accident must have happened," said Tránsito as she saw him descending the hill, desperately whipping up his donkey. And so it was!

With tears streaming down his face the boy told them that the *gringa* had been bitten by a snake and that she was going to die, for no one in his house knew what to do to help her.

There were no horses in the corral and it would take a half hour before a peon could bring one in from the field and saddle it, but the mule belonging to the overseer of the estancia stood near by tied to the fence, saddled and ready to ride, so Mirra called out to him that she was going to take it.

"She's an ugly one, *niña*."

"Never mind! I have ridden horses that were only half broken."

The overseer shrugged his shoulders, shortened the stirrups, helped her to mount and gave her the reins.

Juan Britos rode ahead as fast as his donkey would carry him and Mirra followed at his heels over the "horseshoe," as the short cut was called.

Stretched out on the ground near the cabin lay the dead snake, glistening in the sun like a ribbon of oxidized silver. Inside the hut, on a cord bed, which Juan had made by driving some stakes into the ground, Mirra found the child, looking very pale. A guitar string was tied around her leg and two drops of yellowish, viscous liquid stood out on her skin on the spot where the viper had bitten her.

"That's the poison," said an old crone, who acted as a sort of medicine woman for the neighborhood. "It is racing through her blood and consuming her. The best thing to do is to take a suckling cat, cut it into pieces alive, and lay the pieces over the bite to draw out the blood. But we haven't any such a cat around here!"

"That is superstitious nonsense," said Mirra, making a cross-shaped incision above the wound.

The child moaned as the blood rushed out.

"I must suck out the poisoned blood myself. Have you any tobacco? Give me a handful!"

She put what they gave her into her mouth and began to chew it. Then she placed her lips to the wound and sucked with all her might.

Juan Britos watched her with tears in his eyes; and when Mirra stopped to spit out the poison, fearing that

she was not going to continue, he kept asking whether there was not a little left.

"That's all!" said Mirra finally. She threw away the tobacco, kissed the girl, who had stopped crying, and asked Juan Britos to lead her as far as "Dappled Horse Road." From there on she could find her way home alone.

The mountain was full of blossoms, but Mirra paid little attention to the things about her. Within she felt that soft glow of happiness which always rewarded her after she had exposed herself to danger for the sake of someone else. She was riding swiftly along on her mule, scarcely listening to Juan Britos, as he talked about his simple love affair, when she noticed a man on horseback, accompanied by a peon, standing still in the highway.

She saw that it was Gracián and she closed her eyes, her pulses throbbing. The mule went on a short distance and Mirra heard the voice which she had never forgotten — the voice which she had tried in vain to forget.

He spoke to her as simply as if he were asking pardon of a sister. He did not hold out his hand to her. He scarcely looked at her.

"I have come to ask your forgiveness, Mirra, and I shall stay here until I have obtained it."

There was so much humility and so much genuine sorrow in his voice that she went up to him as he stood there waiting in the road and gave him her hand as if she had just parted from him the night before.

"What have I to forgive, Gracián? Who am I that you should ask pardon of me?"

It was a moment before Gracián could master his emotion.

As soon as he could speak, he explained that he had come from Capilla del Monte. He had avoided Cosquín and the near-by towns so that no one should know of his return to the mountains. And thanks to the peon who had carried his luggage for him, he had found lodging in a house on the plains of Olain, far away from any town and about three leagues distant from Black Valley.

The little cavalcade proceeded slowly down the road — Juan Britos and the peon ahead, Mirra and Gracián behind.

But as Gracián talked to her, the wrongs which a moment before she had so unhesitatingly pardoned, rose accusingly in Mirra's memory.

How could she have forgotten them? How could she let Gracián occupy again his old place in her heart? The spell which for so long had been cast about him was broken. She saw him as he was — weak, passionate, inconsiderate, forgetful of his manly honor, to-day sincerely and humbly asking her pardon, but to-morrow . . . ?

It was easy and pleasant enough to forgive him on the impulse of the moment, without weighing his faults or considering the wisdom of the action, if forgiveness meant only to wish him no ill, to give him her hand when they met, or even to be pleased when good fortune

befell him. But if forgiveness meant that she must forget the wrongs which he had done her . . . his faithlessness . . . his desertion . . . No, no, no! She could never forget that!

He was still talking to her, his voice and gestures awaking a thousand memories of her childhood. Suddenly he stopped and pointing to a cross by the roadside, asked in an awestruck tone who had met death there.

"That is where they killed him," Mirra answered in a low voice.

As shocked as if an apparition had risen before him, Gracián took off his hat, dismounted, and reverently straightened the wreath of withered flowers which the girl had placed there two or three days before and which the wind had blown over, scattering the petals of the roses.

And Mirra, seeing the tears in his eyes, remembered that her father, when mortally wounded, had not been content to grant his murderer a niggardly pardon and ask only that he be not prosecuted. No! He had forgiven him with his whole heart and in order that the wrong might be completely forgotten, had refused to speak his name. And she . . . ? Could she not also forgive?

"Oh, Gracián!" she cried and held out both her hands to him. He took them and kissed them, wetting them with his tears which fell less for the memory of the dead man who had been his friend, than for the sweet re-

lief of knowing that she would be again to him what she had been in the old days of their childhood.

He mounted his horse, but he only accompanied her as far as the place on the hillside from which many years ago Don Jesús de Viscarra had pointed out to him the blurred group of buildings that formed Black Valley.

"I shall see you again, Mirra."

"Yes," she answered, and added: "Things have changed since you were here."

"I imagine so — and I am sorry."

"You must meet my aunt and my cousins. You must see the children in my school. Pastora has married and is living on the Peak."

"And the willow grove? And the orchard?"

"Many of the trees have died and in their places are others, and in front of my window . . ."

"Ah, yes! Your window!"

"You should see it, Gracián! There is a great rose-bush that was not there in your day."

"Will you give me a rose when I come?"

"As many as you like!"

Chapter XIX

GROPING IN THE DARK

ELECTION DAY drew near. It was preceded as usual throughout the mountain districts by the arrival of busy commissions of surveyors, who appeared on every road, carrying their painted poles and shining theodolites, measuring distances and painting red numbers on white stones to mark off the angles in that rough country.

"They are going to build an automobile road and a bridge over the river. There will be work for everybody!" said the credulous people.

"Don't ever believe it!" replied the skeptics.

But many of the humbler voters were persuaded by just such maneuvers to cast their ballots for the candidate of the commission that had come to their district the month before and made them all sorts of fine promises for after election.

The well-to-do land owners and merchants were visited by the political boss, who dazzled them with pleasant prospects of special privileges, exemption from taxes, large scale certification of livestock, road construction, persecution of cattle thieves — providing the

man himself was not one — and things of that sort.

The opposition counteracted this propaganda by sticking up posters criticizing the government and painting their slogans with tar on the whitewashed sides of the houses. They formed committees which provided free beer and roast beef on Sundays and on week days as much *caña* as one liked, as well as cock fights on which the poorest peasant could bet his dollar, and tables of *monte* where the richer ones plucked each other every night by the light of a carbide lamp.

Since the committees of the government party were engaged in undertakings of this nature, the police showed themselves impartial and let things take care of themselves.

On election day each party shut its adherents up in a great barnlike building and the excitement was increased by the size of the crowd and the enormous quantities of food and drink which are always the most important features of an election-day feast.

In one corner of the hall the carcasses of two or three cows were lying on iron window gratings over a fire, roasting slowly.

Amoroso was the member of the government party's committee responsible for this part of the work and he performed it conscientiously. Now and then, when he thought a piece done, he drew out his knife, wiped it off on the edge of his boot and carved the animal directly through the joints with the skill of an expert. Then he cut the steaming meat into smaller pieces and laid it on a piece of canvas which was stretched out on

the ground and from which the peasants who were of his party helped themselves, spearing the meat on the points of their daggers.

When they had first arrived from their farms they had all been stolid and taciturn, but by now their eyes were bloodshot and aflame with excitement. And according to each one's temperament and the amount he had drunk, they were standing together in groups, joking loudly, or sitting by themselves, melancholy and sullen.

The leaders of the party entered the hall and called out:

"Who is there in here who hasn't voted yet?"

Of course, no one was interested in this small matter.

"You over there! You haven't voted!"

"All right! Where do I go?"

"I'll take you — in an automobile."

"I can go by myself."

"No! Nobody leaves this place alone!"

"Then I'm not going!"

"You're not going? What do you mean? Come! Come on, my friend . . . !"

Thereupon the refractory citizen was pushed slowly toward the door — a course of treatment which he accepted in good or in bad part, according to the state of his temper — and finally went out, fumbling in his pockets for his registration certificate.

If the candidate himself was in the district and known to be a liberal man, the peasants would "put

on the brakes" and refuse to vote until he came to persuade them by handing out bright new *pesos* or *chirolas,* which they promptly gambled away.

"See here, *don!* They've skinned me! Give me enough for another throw, will you?"

"Have you voted yet?"

"Sure thing!"

"Really?"

"Of course I voted. I was one of the first. Here! This fellow saw me go!"

Then just as the candidate was putting his hand into his pocket, someone would shout out:

"It's a lie! He hasn't voted and he can't vote, for he doesn't belong to this district."

"Let's see your certificate!"

The *gaucho* would pull it out.

"Why, you aren't even registered here! How dare you say you have voted? You shameless liar!"

"Don't insult me, *don!*"

And he would hang around, resentful and embarrassed until he managed to slip away when nobody was looking and go over to the other committee and pilfer some *pesos* there in exchange for the vote which he could not give.

The roads in the vicinity of the election headquarters swarmed like beehives and the dust raised by the wagons as they raced by, settled down like a brown veil over the countryside.

Some peasants who could not be subdued to party

discipline, walked along by themselves, calling out:

"I don't have to vote for anything or anybody. You are all tarred with the same brush!"

This did not keep them, however, from asking one of the committees for a hand-out as soon as they felt hungry or thirsty and they would enter one of the halls for that purpose and sit down near the roast or beside the jugs of wine.

During the whole proceeding, Amoroso neither spoke nor drank. Occasionally he cut himself off a piece of meat and ate it with some bread.

Lazarus was watching him sullenly. Since he had been living in Cosquín, he had got into the habit of hanging around the saloons and drinking. And he resented the other man's sobriety.

Time had not wiped his old passions from his soul. Through all the years that had passed he had been waiting for an opportunity to get even with the woman who had insulted him and with anyone who was in her service or who pampered her pride.

Someone walked up to him and said:

"Try this piece of meat! It's good!"

Lazarus made a disdainful gesture and pointed to Flavia's peon with the butt of his whip.

"What! Do you mean to tell me that anything good can come from those hands!"

Amoroso at the moment was cutting himself a piece of the udder. As he put it into his mouth Lazarus went on:

"They say that monkeys never eat anything but

fruit. They must mean that they eat fruit when they can't get an udder."

The whole group about them waited in silence for Amoroso's answer. The cries of the *taba*-players rang through the hall.

"I'll bet a *peso* he hits!"

"I'll take you!"

"Two that he doesn't!"

"Here you are!"

But Amoroso said nothing. He did not even look at Lazarus, who stood a few yards away from him with his back to the wall, his broad belt shining with inlaid silver, his *poncho* thrown over his arm, the metal hilt of a dagger projecting from under his short jacket.

Irritated by the peon's silence, Lazarus took a swallow of gin, threw the jug up into the air, and hit it with his whip handle, smashing it to bits. Then he walked up to Amoroso, saying, as the latter avoided his eyes:

"If my partner here wants to play *taba,* I'll back up his game, for he ought to be lucky at play, since he's unlucky at love. It's queer, too, for he didn't pick out a skittish sweetheart, but one that bears Don Pablo's brand, and *he* doesn't keep skittish stock!"

Amoroso had paused in his eating, fixing his eyes on the ground and wiping his knife on the hide of the roasted cow. When he heard the malicious reference to Flavia, he stopped, picked up his weapon quietly and walked toward the door.

If they had asked him his name at that moment, he could not have told it.

Into his brain had flashed a terrible plan which shut out every other thought. He had borne all he could. Every Sunday he had watched this man walk up to the mistress of Black Valley and help her mount her horse and the deed had roused him as if it were an open act of hostility aimed at his mistress and her daughter

He had learned of Lazarus' visit to Black Valley to tell Mirra of the love affair between Gracián and Victoria.

Why was this man forever crossing their path?

His blood boiled as he thought how Lazarus had persecuted his mistress while she lived at Black Valley and how he now defamed her!

He would have to kill him so that Flavia could live in peace. But he could not do it here among all these people. They would never let him fight it out, but would hold him back and let his enemy escape.

He would wait until he could meet him in the street when no one was around.

He started to go out, but the door was shut.

"Nobody can leave this place until after he has voted," said one of the men who were guarding the entrance. "Have you voted? Let's see your certificate!"

Amoroso showed it to him.

"You haven't voted! You can't go till they come and get you and take you to the voting booth."

The peon waited for a while without a word. Then a democrat-wagon drove up, full of voters who had already done their civic duty under the guardianship of one of the leaders of the group.

"Now you can get in," they said.

Amoroso climbed into the wagon with several other peasants. He went to the voting place and dropped into the urn the slip which the Commissioner had given him. On the way back, before the wagon reached the hall, he jumped out and went home.

He picked up a *poncho,* which he would need later, and was going out again when Flavia saw him.

"Amoroso, haven't you voted?"

"Yes, *niña.*"

"Where are you going, then?"

He did not answer. He could not lie and he did not want to tell her the truth.

"Have you been drinking, Amoroso?"

He took a few hesitating steps forward, not knowing what to answer.

"Someone has been saying bad things about you," he said finally.

"Who?"

"Lazarus."

"What did he say?"

"I can't tell you. It was something about you and Don Pablo."

"When was this?"

"Just now . . . at the party headquarters."

"He lied."

"Can I tell him so?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can I tell him that it isn't true?"

"Yes, yes!"

A smile lit up the peasant's gloomy face.

"And do you know why he said it?" Flavia cried angrily. "He has followed me about for years, like an evil shadow, rejoicing at my misfortunes. He would like to see my daughter ruined or dead, and me left to die alone, wretched and despised by everyone, and all because . . ."

She was trembling with anger as she spoke and Amoroso felt her hot breath on his face.

"Why?"

"Because he dared to talk of my being his wife; because my brother struck him with his whip when he learned of it. He is seeking his revenge now. . . ."

"I thought so," murmured Amoroso, and walked slowly out of the house.

Flavia watched him go. As she grew calmer she regretted her angry words. She rushed to the door and called, but Amoroso had disappeared. She had a sudden feeling in her heart that one of the two men had not long to live. But then she persuaded herself that there was no imminent danger. When she thought of her daughter's unhappiness, her own past troubles seemed so insignificant and far away that she could not believe that they would stir anyone to acts of violence.

Amoroso wandered about the streets until nightfall waiting for Lazarus. The town was full of the bustle of vehicles coming and going and messengers, more or less tipsy, who cried out an occasional "Hurrah!" for their own party.

At dusk Lazarus appeared on horseback and Amoroso

followed him to a house on the outskirts of the town where they were having a dance, to judge from the crowd and the music of an accordion and a guitar which he could hear in the distance.

Lazarus hobbled his pony and went in without suspecting any danger, and Amoroso waited in the darkness with unabating patience.

It was very late before Lazarus reappeared and he must have drunk a good deal, for his steps were unsteady. He stopped for a moment to pick out his horse, his eyes still blinded from the glare within. He unhobbled the animal and was seizing the bridle rein when Flavia's peon sprang upon him from behind and dealt him a rude blow in the back with the flat side of his knife.

"Defend yourself, scoundrel, and say your prayers, for you are going to die!"

In the presence of this danger, Lazarus immediately grew sober. He sprang aside and drew his dagger, wrapping his *poncho* about his left arm.

A frightened mule broke its tether and ran off, starting a hubbub among the other beasts. Their owners came running out of the house to see what had happened and a ring of curious on-lookers soon formed around the two adversaries.

A woman brought out a candle, which was quickly extinguished by the wind.

"Get out of here with your candle! Do you want to make them as blind as a couple of vizcachas?" someone cried.

"They're two governmentals," said another, "and they want to have it out with each other. Give 'em room!"

Amoroso sprang aside, bending over as if his back ached and directing all his blows at Lazarus' abdomen. Lazarus warded them off with great dexterity, his blade flashing in the darkness and descending in terrible strokes upon his strange opponent, who skipped about between his legs like a monkey and intercepted the strokes with his left arm, wrapped in a blanket.

In the solemn silence one could hear them both panting. Suddenly the hoarse voice of Amoroso rang out:

"They marked your face with a whip and now I'm going to mark your guts with an iron."

"If you've got the claws to reach them!"

"You are at the end of your lying."

"I would have lied if I had said anything good about the woman who has been making a fool of you.

"You followed her around like a dog and then got left!"

"So did you!"

"You lie! Take that! It'll learn you to tell the truth! And that! And that!"

And Amoroso struck him three vicious blows. Lazarus lost his footing as he tried to dodge them and fell against his horse just as the knife tore across his abdomen.

He raised his hand to his eyes as if to snatch a bandage from them, and fell to the ground, in a pool of blood, his intestines slowly slipping out.

The sound of horses' hoofs broke the silence.

"The police! The police!" someone cried and the crowd dispersed, as the sergeant rode up brandishing a long sword and accompanied by two terrified guards in shirtsleeves and sandals, each with a cutlass which flashed in the air.

"Put up your hands!"

Amoroso was standing very quietly with his back against a wall, cleaning his knife with a handful of weeds. Seeing the sergeant, he handed it over to him and let them put the handcuffs on him without a word.

The news of the bloody encounter reached Flavia the next day after she had stood at the door all night long, trembling with cold and fear, hoping against hope that Amoroso would return and that no more crimes would be committed in her name. Under what unlucky star had she been born? God forgive her for what was perhaps occurring at this very hour!

When she learned of the duel and heard that Amoroso was badly wounded in the head and in the left hand, she felt somewhat relieved to know that at least Lazarus had been killed in fair fight.

She was so confused that her thoughts went no further than this. She felt as if she were in some strange pathless forest, groping in the dark, trying to find a way out — not so much for herself as for her daughter. But she did not know where or when she would find it.

With an impatience born as much of her anxiety to free herself as of her desire for revenge, she had en-

trusted her daughter's happiness to Gracián. And now there was only one means of saving Victoria from misery and that it lay wholly in Gracián's power to give or to withhold.

And she knew no more of his whereabouts than if the earth had swallowed him, until one day Victoria said:

"Gracián is up in the mountains."

"That can't be possible!"

"He has been seen going to Black Valley and they say that he is staying at a house three leagues from there."

Flavia realized the full significance of the words.

"What are you going to do?" she asked anxiously.

Victoria broke into a bitter laugh.

"Oh, my little daughter! My dear little girl!" Flavia cried, weeping but not daring to touch the girl, as helpless as in the time long ago when she could only look at her from afar.

"What am I going to do?"

"Yes, darling, what can you do now?"

Touched by her mother's despair, the girl threw herself in her arms.

"Oh, mama! What *can* I do? There is no help for me!"

Her mother tried to read in her eyes the full extent of her sorrow, but Victoria hid her face in her hands.

"Oh, mama! I wish that I were dead!"

These were the saddest days of Flavia's life. She and Victoria spent hours together without exchanging a word. Both lived in the hope of receiving some word

from Gracián, and both knew that the first one who heard anything from him would speak.

And during those weary silences, where were Victoria's thoughts? Sometimes Flavia thought that she perceived a look of reproach in her daughter's eyes, for not having watched over her and protected her.

At such times she could have thrown herself at Victoria's feet and implored her to use her life in any way that would alleviate her pain.

One day Victoria told her simply that Gracián was going to marry Mirra.

"Who said so?"

"What difference does it make who said it?" she answered harshly. "You know it is true, don't you?"

From her tone Flavia could not tell whether she was suffering from love or only from hurt pride. She did not wish to force her confidence. But when she saw a little later that Victoria was sadder and gentler than usual, she took courage and questioned her and found that in spite of everything the unhappy girl still loved Gracián.

She hesitated no longer then as to what she should do. She could not consult Victoria. She must act without her knowledge. She would go herself to Black Valley, tell Mirra the whole story, and beg her to have pity on her daughter.

Chapter XX

THE LAST ROSE

EVERY morning for some time Gracián had been riding over to Black Valley. He traversed the three leagues from the house in which he was staying with his spirit exalted and purified by the thought of Mirra, feeling that beneath that golden autumn glow the springtime of his life was beginning.

His horse already knew the road and trotted along at an even pace, neither hurrying nor loitering. Gracián liked to let the reins dangle and give himself up to his thoughts.

Until a few days before he had not spoken to Mirra of his love for her. He dreaded to have his dream shattered and he feared that the regard which she showed him might be only the revival of her old friendship.

His path did not always lead as far as the buildings, for sometimes he met her out riding through the fields with one of the peons, looking over the herd or inspecting the cornfields, and then he joined her and rode along with them.

The girl managed the affairs of the ranch with the efficiency of her father and whatever had been neglected for a time after his death was now set in order again

— the fences were repaired, the sheep were sheared at the proper season and no longer suffered from the itch in winter, all the arable land was under cultivation, and not a single hide was lost when a pest or a drought decimated the herds.

Mirra directed the labor of the peons with a zeal that made it bear fruit and their shiftless, fatalistic souls were impressed by the example of her industry.

And so deeply rooted among the peasants of the district was their affection for her that if anyone had told them that Mirra was going to be married, they would have all felt it their personal right to inquire into the qualifications of her lover and to reject him if he fell below their standards.

But Mirra had shown no inclination to marry.

Two or three suitors, the sons of owners of near-by estancias, of modest lineage and some little money, had occasionally waited for her after church, hovered around her house, and even paid her calls, but she never encouraged them and they soon gave up their difficult task.

"If it's a king she wants, there are four of them in a pack of cards!" said the mother of one of the disappointed suitors. Then the whole question of whom she would marry was forgotten until Gracián's appearance reawakened their resentment and set their tongues wagging.

"She'll go the way of Camargo's daughter," said someone.

Mirra either heard nothing of this gossip or willfully

ignored it and continued to receive the young man with all her affection and charm.

But she was in no hurry for him to speak, for she was afraid that the feeling that had brought him to Black Valley was no more than the memory of their childhood's friendship.

Whenever she met him out in the fields they rode along together to the plowed lands or to the pastures and then turned back to the house. Sometimes they would stop on their way, give their horses to the peon and walk over to their old retreat under the willows, which still had the invincible charm of their childhood. There Mirra listened to Gracián talk and even the most indifferent subjects took on life and meaning.

Gradually the conversation approached the theme which neither of them dared broach, but which was uppermost in the minds of both. And the day finally came when it was impossible to keep silence longer.

"I will speak to her to-morrow," Gracián had said to himself as he rode back to his lodgings somewhat earlier than usual because a thunderstorm was threatening.

He had had luncheon at Black Valley under the careful chaperonage of Mirra's aunt and at siesta time they had all gone out to gather peaches. The children preferred to hunt for the green vines of wild grapes that grew in the shade along the wall and pick the fragrant fruit.

At every step Gracián had found something which invited him to speak to Mirra of what was in his heart. Now it was a venerable tree, one of their old friends,

now a waterfall in the glen where they had picked watercress and from whose waters they had drunk, now a gigantic rock like a monolith on the edge of the orchard where they used to climb up and shout down the valley to wake the echoes.

"Do you remember, Mirra?" he would say and then fall silent again from emotion.

"It is going to rain," remarked Mirra's aunt and it seemed a safe prophecy. It had been cloudly all day and the leaden skies were now so close to the earth that they seemed to rest on the dark peaks of the mountains.

A cold damp breeze stirred the trees which shivered under the gray sky, feeling the approach of winter.

"Let's go back!" suggested Mirra.

"I will speak to her to-morrow," thought Gracián, and while they were saddling his horse he went around to the kitchen where Tránsito had told him that she had a plate of cracknel for him.

"That'll keep you from catching cold if you get wet!"

"Do you think it is going to rain?"

"Well, it looks pretty cloudy. I wouldn't be surprised if there was a storm."

"But look at the sun!"

The ashen sky was filling with clouds black as the smoke from a fire, but in the midst of them there was still a rift through which the rays of the setting sun entered like a great fan of light.

"It's already raining, *niño,* and the sun is shining! That's a bad sign! The devil is taking a wife to himself!"

They brought him a coarse, heavy *poncho* and he galloped off, followed by Mirra's affectionate glances.

"When will he speak?" she wondered.

It began to lighten.

The first drops of rain fell in slanting lines splashing noisily on the stones and flattening into little round circles. By the time Gracián reached the river it was as dark as night, but he was still able to follow the road by the light of the flashes of lightning which made the pebbles shine like silver.

The storm lasted for several days. All the mountain streams were swollen and all the paths washed away.

From the veranda of his house Gracián watched every break in the clouds for a sign of fair weather, like a prisoner waiting to escape.

Finally the sun came out and swept away the mists, and as a sign that the flood was over, the snails put out their timid horns and crawled about with their houses on their backs.

Then Gracián saddled his horse and rode over to Black Valley.

He found Mirra down near the dam, giving directions for the clearing of the irrigation ditches, which the heavy rains had filled up with underbrush and débris. There, under the murmuring leaves of the friendly grove, he spoke to her.

"When I came to ask forgiveness of you, Mirra, I did not dare ask for more, for I had no right to expect as much."

The girl started to speak, but checked herself.

"But your pardon was not all that I wanted. I wanted your love, I wanted something far more than mere forgetfulness of my faults, more even than your old friendship. I did not speak to you, for fear I might be mistaken, but I hoped . . ."

"You were right," said Mirra.

"In what . . . in hoping?"

"No, no! You were right in not speaking."

"And am I wrong in speaking now?"

Mirra was silent for a moment. Then she said:

"I don't know. How can I tell?"

"But if you don't know, Mirra, whom can I ask?"

"No one, no one!" answered the girl impetuously, and then she added in a gentler tone: "I will give you my answer, myself."

They had been walking toward the house, Gracián leading his horse by the bridle, and they had reached Mirra's window. In front of it stood the rosebush from which during the spring and summer she had gathered so many blossoms to place upon her father's cross. Of late she had picked a few for Gracián.

The bush had been badly damaged by the storm and there was only one bud left hidden away on a sheltered branch. Mirra saw it and thought of a way to gain time for the answer to Gracián's question with which she would pledge him her word and her heart.

He should wait for her answer until that last bud opened and then she would give him the rose to keep forever.

"When?" insisted Gracián.

"I will give you my answer, myself."

"But when?"

She looked at him half reproachfully and said:

"You have waited so many years. Can't you wait a few more days?"

He consented reluctantly. But every time he saw her looking so sweet and seeming to grow happier hour by hour, he asked her again: "When?"

And she would glance at the rosebush and answer "Soon!"

One day she said "To-morrow!" so gayly that he felt touched and elated and ventured to kiss her hand — but only once, for Mirra stopped him.

"Wait until to-morrow!" she said.

She had cut away the branches that might injure the flower or give it too much shade, and she knew that in a few more hours the bud would be a glorious rose which would tell him better than she could of her love and her hopes.

She thought again of Gracián's old promise and certain now of what she was going to answer him the next day, she said as the time for him to leave drew near:

"One night, Gracián, you made me a promise which you have not kept."

"What was it?"

"You had to go back to school. You were going to leave the next day. It had been raining and I had been packing your suitcase. I went out to the orchard. . . ."

"I remember," he said softly. "You saw Flavia leave the house and you wanted to know what she was doing out in the wet under the willows."

"She didn't go to the willow grove. Amoroso was down there watching the road. She went to the orchard and I followed her. I never told you about it."

"What did she go for?"

"Neither you, nor I, nor anyone in Black Valley then knew who Victoria's mother was."

"Flavia!"

"Yes. Flavia was there near the wall beyond the quince trees which hid her from everyone's sight, and Victoria, who was twelve or thirteen years old then, was sitting on her lap. They were talking about you."

"About me?"

"Yes, about you. They were saying that you were my friend then. . . ."

"Then? And now?"

"I am not so sure now!" said Mirra teasingly.

"They were talking about you and Flavia said to her daughter: 'Some day Gracián will forget Mirra. . . .'"

"Why did she say that? How could she know?"

"You see! She did not have to be a prophetess to read in the stars how your life would turn out!"

"No, no! She was wrong, Mirra. I have never forgotten you. I have wasted years without seeing you, but never a day without thinking of you. Wherever I went I was as restless as the Wandering Jew, for with-

out my realizing it, the places and the things where I found nothing that was like you, disgusted me and bored me."

"That's what you say now!" she replied. ". . . Victoria did not understand what Flavia meant and then she continued: 'Gracián will forget Mirra and be *your* friend.' She said 'friend' for it was too soon to speak to her of a 'lover.' . . ."

"And now you see, Mirra, that after all she was mistaken."

Mirra said nothing for a moment, hoping that he would see the unfairness of his own remark and modify it.

"Then you have never been in love with Victoria?"

"No, Mirra! I can say so truly, for in her I sought only you, I loved only you. The thought of you like a dream or a shadow led me on. And I stopped loving her at once when I saw you at last in the church that morning. I realized my madness then. That was all."

"Oh, Gracián!" she cried, moved by the words which she could doubt no longer.

"That was all," he repeated. "What I loved in Victoria was what there was in her of you; she had lived here; she recalled you to my mind; when I was with her I seemed to see you. . . ."

"All my life, Gracián, I have feared . . ."

"What?"

"That Flavia had spoken the truth and that for Victoria's sake you would forget me. Do you remember

that night when you found me weeping in my room and you promised . . ."

"I remember!"

"I asked you whether you would forget me . . ."

"I remember it all, as if it were yesterday."

"And you said 'No,' but I wanted to make sure, so I begged: 'If you do forget me, Gracián, don't let it be on her account — on account of Camargo's daughter' . . . Something seemed to tell me that night that Flavia would find a way. . . ."

"Mirra!" he cried, wounded to the quick. "Why do you say such things? Flavia was mistaken, you can see that for yourself, for I have come back to you after all these years and after all my wanderings, and I am waiting for your answer."

"You shall have it to-morrow," she replied.

They were walking along beside a cornfield just at sunset and a wind whispered in the stalks of ripe corn.

"Until to-morrow, then," he said, giving her his hand and taking his horse's bridle from the peon who followed them.

"To-morrow afternoon," she said, thinking of her rosebush.

EARLY the next morning the overseer knocked at the door of Mirra's room, to ask about the barley seed which they were planning to sow that day for winter fodder.

"I am coming right away," Mirra answered. She had awakened even earlier than usual, happy in the anticipation of a great joy.

As she came out into the patio she saw a woman on horseback waiting for her. She had to look twice before she recognized who it was.

"Flavia!" she cried in astonishment, and a sudden pain thrilled her soul.

"You must be surprised to see me!"

"Yes," said Mirra gently, helping her dismount and trembling as she touched her hand, which was as cold as death, "for you never come here any more and it is so early!"

"Why should I come? This time it is for my daughter's sake, Mirra. . . ."

"Oh! . . ."

Flavia entered the house and went directly to Mirra's room, while the girl ran out to the shed to give the grain to a peon who was waiting. Then she rejoined her visitor.

"I have come on my daughter's account, Mirra, because I have heard that you are going to marry Gracián."

Mirra did not answer. The older woman looked searchingly into her eyes to see what she could read there. Was she happy? Or had he perhaps deceived her, too? The pure light shining in the girl's innocent face reassured her.

And as Mirra did not speak, she asked:

"Are you really going to marry him?"

Mirra's eyes flashed with surprise and Flavia understood.

"I know I have no right to come to your house and ask you to give me an account of your life . . ."

"No," said Mirra.

"I know it. But when I tell you what great trouble I am in, you will see that there was no other way."

"What has happened?"

"I left home during the night, for I did not want Victoria to suspect my coming. That's why I reached here so early. When I return I shall give her some excuse. But she must never know that I have been here!"

Mirra heard in the trembling voice the woman's soul wrung with shame and sorrow, but in the smile that passed over her lips she saw a fluttering hope.

"Tell me what you want, in God's name!"

"They say that you are going to marry Gracián, and I have come to tell you, Mirra — I will swear it by the blood of your father! — that he has given my daughter his word . . ."

Mirra did not understand.

"You mean," she asked anxiously, "that he is still making love to her?"

"No. I mean that he loved her first, that he gave her his word to marry her, and that he has robbed her of all she had to give."

Bursting into tears, Flavia threw herself at the girl's feet. Mirra trembled.

"So far no one knows of it, but our disgrace cannot be hidden much longer. She has said nothing to me, but I know. I cannot help knowing. The very dread

with which she avoids me would reveal it to me. I have not seen Gracián and I do not wish to see him, but someone must tell him that he cannot leave my daughter this way, after she has ruined herself for love of him. . . ."

Mirra had risen to her feet and she tried with all her strength to raise her father's sister from the floor.

"No, no, let me stay here at your feet, Mirra, humbled to the very bottom of my soul. Let me hide my face from you."

Sobs stifled her voice, but her next words, though sorrowful, were no longer despairing.

"She has said nothing to me, but I can read it in her eyes. I know that she will kill herself if Gracián does not save her . . . and no one but you, Mirra, can persuade him to do that."

The anguish of her heart found relief in silent tears, when Mirra spoke:

"She will not kill herself. Gracián is good and he will keep his word. Go in peace, Flavia. I will speak to him."

"To-day?"

"Yes, to-day!"

"Are you sure that he will come to-day?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Oh, Mirra, may your father, of whose death I am innocent, look down from heaven and bless you!"

She glided away like a shadow and disappeared. Mirra stayed in her own room, shaken by her grief like a reed at the mercy of the storm.

God's will had ordered it that Flavia's prophecy should come true and she knew that she must accept her destiny.

In the afternoon she received Gracián like a beloved brother who has done wrong.

"Is my answer ready?" he asked.

"No, Gracián. First I want to talk to you."

They were sitting together in the patio opposite a clump of young poplar trees, which were perfectly motionless in the still air except when a little breeze caressed the tallest branches and died away among them.

"You told me yesterday that you really did not love Victoria — that it was all just a passing fancy. And you deceived me."

"I said that it was you I sought in her," he answered apologetically.

"It was a poor excuse. Were you seeking me when you betrayed her?"

"Who told you that?"

"The question is not who told me, but whether it is true."

He did not speak.

"Things cannot go on in this way. Soon all the world will know that you have wronged her and she will die — or kill herself for shame."

"Why should she die? Engagements are made and broken often enough and no one thinks anything about it. If anyone speaks evil of her I will call him to account for his words and teach him to be still."

"But suppose it is not one person, but many?"

"I will silence them all!"

Mirra smiled pityingly. On the ground within reach of her hand grew a clump of flowering broomweed. The blossoms formed a red tassel of downy fuzz. Mirra stooped and picked it.

"Mirra!" he said.

She held it to her lips and blew upon it.

The tassel fell to pieces and the bits of fuzz scattered in every direction.

"Can you pick them up again?"

"No."

"Well, that is what will happen."

He hung his head dejectedly.

"She was not on her guard," Mirra continued, "for she loved you and trusted you. And now she is bound to you by a tie that is stronger than affection."

She hesitated for a moment, and then added gently:

"Gracián, will you abandon your child?"

Astonished by the question, Gracián jumped up, blushing to his forehead. His lips trembled.

"Who told you this?"

"Flavia."

"Was she here?"

"Yes, this morning, and I know that she told the truth."

He was silent for a moment. Then stretching out his arms as if to a sweet vision that was vanishing before his eyes, he cried:

"Oh, Mirra, Mirra! Must I lose you?"

"Yes. Your duty lies yonder — not here with me."

"Do you command it, Mirra? If not . . ."

"I command you, Gracián."

He rose with an effort, his eyes full of tears. It comforted him a little to see that her own eyes were wet.

"Must I go away, then?"

"Yes."

"And never come back? Not even after I have made amends?"

"No, no, never! It will be better so."

"Good-by, then, Mirra."

He took her hand to kiss it, but she drew it gently away.

"We must learn to forget, Gracián. Your duty lies over there."

He walked slowly away from her like a man who has received a mortal blow.

As Mirra entered her room her eye fell upon the rose, that lovely flower that she had been saving for him. It should still be his! She would give it to him as a pledge of her friendship to inspire him with courage to do right. She cut it quickly and hurried out to take it to him.

But he had already started off and was galloping down the road to Cosquín.

She stood for a time watching his figure grow smaller and smaller in the distance as on that day when he rode away to school after his last vacation with them.

Her heart was full of bitterness. To hide her weakness from the others she shut herself up in the schoolroom and knelt down before the figure of the suffer-

ing Christ which had comforted her in all her sorrows and to which her father had raised his dying eyes.

And in order that the rose which she had tended with such care might still be a gift of love, she stood up and laid it at the Saviour's feet.

"Oh divine Love! . . . Rejected Love!" she cried.

And resting her head on the table where she had so often corrected her pupils' copybooks, she began to cry softly.

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